

Geechie Wiley

An Exploration of Enigmatic Virtuosity

by

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ABSTRACT

The name of Geechie Wiley has surfaced only rarely since 1931, when she recorded her second session with the Paramount Company in Grafton, WI. A few scholars including Paul Oliver and Greil Marcus unearthed and promoted her music and called for further research on this enigmatic figure. In other publications, Wiley is frequently given only passing mention in long lists of talented female blues singer-guitarists, or briefly discussed in descriptions of songsters. Her music is lauded in the liner notes of the myriad compilation albums that have re-released her recordings. However, prior to this study, Marcus's three-page profile is the longest work written about Wiley; other contributions range between one sentence and two paragraphs in length. None really answers the question: who was Geechie Wiley?

This thesis begins by documenting my attempt to piece together all information presently available on Geechie Wiley. A biographical chapter, supplemented with a discussion of the blues songster, follows. I then discuss my methodology and philosophy for transcription. This is followed by a critical and comparative analysis of the recordings, using the transcriptions as supplements. Finally, my fifth chapter presents conclusions about Wiley's life, career, and disappearance. My transcriptions of Wiley's six songs are found in the first appendix. Reproductions of Paramount Records advertisements are located in the final appendix. In these ways, this thesis argues that Wiley's work traces the transformation of African-American music from the general secular music of the songsters to the iconic blues genre.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“If Geeshie Wiley did not exist, she could not be invented... She seems to represent the moment when black secular music was coalescing into blues.”¹

“... [T]he singer has already gone missing, you are on her trail, and if the woman in whose presence you now find yourself had left behind no other trace of her existence, this single recording would have been enough to ensure that once heard, she would never be forgotten.”²

Geechie (or Geeshie) Wiley presents an enthralling enigma of blues history. She is known to country blues aficionados as one of the best musicians of the era—and possibly the best female singer among her peers.³ However Wiley was not just a blues singer. She more accurately identified as a songster,⁴ a much older and more informative label. In this capacity, her musical choices evoke images and sounds of the past, but she juxtaposed historical styles with the contemporary popular genres. She contrasted traditional songs with original compositions. Her guitar arrangements are individual, and her vocal style is distinctive. Although scholars compare her to great artists of early blues like Charley Patton and Memphis Minnie, Wiley is not documented in blues history as these musicians are.

¹ Don Kent, liner notes, *Mississippi Masters: Early American Blues Classics, 1927-35*, Yazoo Records 2007, 1994.

² Greil Marcus, “Who Was Geechie Wiley?,” *The Oxford American* 27-28 (1999): 80.

³ Gayle Dean Wardlow, e-mail message to author, October 15, 2010.

⁴ In this thesis, the term songster refers to a rural singer, using the parlance of Paul Oliver and Howard W. Odum. Pocket-sized songbooks are also sometimes called songsters.

Armed with a wide array of potential sources, I set out to answer Marcus's question: who was Geechie Wiley? In this thesis I also seek to contextualize both Wiley and her music. Informed by verifiable facts as well as rumors and by musical analysis, the elusive Wiley comes into better focus. A review of the literature reveals existing shreds of information about Wiley and her recordings. In this document I attempt to synthesize the few biographical and historical facts I have unearthed. The central work of this thesis is the transcriptions, which I presented in a modified score devised by the author to capture Wiley's performance. I have included standard notation for the guitar accompaniment. The subsequent musical analysis combines a discussion of her vocal work, guitar arrangements, lyrics, and the dramatic effect of each performance. Finally, I draw conclusions about Wiley—pinpointing specific qualities and attributes that made her a singular musician, describing her as a performer, in an effort to shed light on the reasons for her disappearance from history and recollection.

In my attempt to improve upon the elusive biography of Geechie Wiley,⁵ I quickly realized that crucial facts are, indeed, unknown and they remain undiscovered at the time of this writing. An OCLC WorldCat search revealed that Wiley's recorded musical tracks have been released—either as a collection or singly—numerous times. Liner notes for these compilations yielded a few helpful sources. Most notable among these were Don Kent's notes for the album *Mississippi Masters: Early American Blues Classics, 1927-35*.⁶ He describes

⁵ I am grateful to Professor Angelita D. Reyes of ASU's Department of African and African American Studies, for the term 'elusive biography' and her encouragement.

⁶ Kent, liner notes.

Wiley's possible regions of origin, dramatic aspects of her music, and some analysis as well. Richard Nevins and Allen Lowe describe characteristics of Wiley's music in notes accompanying their respective collections.⁷

Several experts have contributed insights or information. Tammy L. Kernodle (Miami University of Ohio), Angelita D. Reyes (Arizona State University), David Warren Steele (University of Mississippi), and Tracey Laird (Agnes Scott College) confirmed the paucity of Wiley's biographical information. Archivist Charles J. Haddix (Marr Sound Archives, University of Missouri—Kansas City), Laura Gayle Green (Head, Music/Media Library, University of Missouri—Kansas City) made helpful suggestions and arranged for Rob Detjen, DMA candidate, to peruse the database of *Jazz Advertised*, since I was unable to travel to a library that held that source. I am likewise indebted to blues historian Gayle Dean Wardlow, William R. Ferris at University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, blues expert Jim O'Neal, rock music author and critic Greil Marcus, author and editor John Jeremiah Sullivan, and Paramount historian Alex van der Tuuk of ParamountsHome for information, leads, and advice. These scholars pointed me toward various archives. Digitally, I searched through the American Memory Project at the Library of Congress, the Marr Sound Archives at University of Missouri-Kansas City, the University of Mississippi blues archives, and indices of various African-American periodicals such as the *Chicago Defender*, but found no additional information. Wardlow supplied additional, non-published

⁷ Richard Nevins, liner notes, *Before The Blues, Vol. 2: The Early American Black Music Scene*, Yazoo Records 2016, 1996; Allen Lowe, liner notes for *American Pop From Minstrel to Mojo: On Record, 1893-1946*, West Hill Audio Archives CD-1017, 1998: 70.

biographical information. Van der Tuuk provided images of Paramount Records advertisements and catalogs from ParamountsHome collections including advertisements and catalog records. Finally, my thesis chair queried the eight-hundred-member Society for American Music about Wiley through its e-mail list, an effort that again produced no new information.

Journals, magazines, and books yielded slightly more promising results. Most of these sources only mention Wiley in a list of influences on other musicians or alongside other female musicians. Tammy L. Kernodle's "Having Her Say: The Blues as the Black Woman's Lament"⁸ places Wiley on a list of self-accompanied rural blues women along with Mattie Delaney, Elvie Thomas, and Memphis Minnie.⁹

The most beneficial sources I found were a book by Wardlow, a section of a book and an article by Greil Marcus, and a chapter (related to Marcus's works) by John Jeremiah Sullivan. These three authors had earlier accomplished most of the initial work for a study about Wiley. Wardlow's book *Chasin' That Devil Music* follows the story of the blues. Most of his information about Wiley comes from interviews he, with collaborator Ishmon Bracey, completed in 1963. Marcus's article "Who Was Geechie Wiley?" focuses solely on Wiley. The article and his discussion of Wiley in his earlier book *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* contain almost the same information. In the article, however, Marcus is more closely concerned with Wiley while the book relates to Dylan.

⁸ Tammy L. Kernodle, "Having Her Say: The Blues as the Black Woman's Lament," *Women's Voices Across Musical Worlds* (Boston: Northeastern University Press), 2004: 213-231.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

More concrete facts about the recordings themselves, more speculation on Wiley's origins, and reactions and thoughts from scholars are included in this article. Sullivan's contribution originated in his self-described work as a fact-checker for Marcus' writings about Wiley. Sullivan's information is much more detailed than that of Marcus and Wardlow. He includes more facts about Wiley's life as well as analysis of Wiley's music and lyrics.

All of this research constitutes very little concrete information and leaves much room for further discoveries. Previous scholars have collected data mostly from interviews, sparse records, and observations. Most specifics of Wiley's life are still unknown and therefore, remain unaddressed. Even Wiley's style of singing and guitar playing have not been established. A few of her peers have been linked to her, but many more have not been mentioned. And it is undetermined why she recorded three discs on two separate dates, but played for no further sessions. I address these issues in the following work. Although I have found some concrete answers, some questions will merely be explored to the furthest degree possible. Specifically, I pursue one question: who was Geechie Wiley?

Chapter 2

BIOGRAPHY AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Very little is known about Geechie Wiley's life. Much of her accepted biographical information is inferred or hearsay. The mystery begins with her name. Wardlow believes that "Geechie" (as Elvie Thomas pronounced it, but also "Geeshie" as spelled on her records) is not her real first name. It is not known whether she took it as a stage name or a general pseudonym. "Geechee" is a Gullah word, and "Gullah" is a modification of "Angola." "Gullah" refers to the language of the slaves and immigrants brought to the coast of North Carolina and Georgia. The Ogeechee River in Georgia has a related name, however this name is probably of Native American origin. The word Geechee is a label for black and occasionally white people from this region, but it can also be used to derogatorily refer to a person from the South whose speech is not easily comprehended.¹⁰

Perhaps because of her stage name, finding Wiley in historical records proved impossible. Beginning searches in Natchez and Mississippi in general (the most likely of Wiley's possible origins), census and genealogy records provided no useful information. The Mississippi Folklife Society, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and the Generations Project had no information. A contact at the Natchez Historical Society provided a few leads. It is possible that Victor Records singer Pearle Ransom from Church Hill in Jefferson County

¹⁰ Marcus, "Who Was Geechie Wiley?," 83.

reinvented herself following a marriage to Willie Shade, taking his first name as her new last name.¹¹

Her date and place of birth are unknown, though in an interview with Gayle Wardlow, Ishmon Bracey (one of two people known to have seen and spoken to Wiley) claimed that she lived in or was born in Natchez, Mississippi.¹² However, Bracey's information is not completely reliable. Scholars such as Dick Spottswood think it is much more likely that she was from somewhere much farther east of the Mississippi River. This conclusion is based on her chosen name as well as the character of her music, which is much more like musicians closer to the Atlantic such as Sarah and Maybelle Carter. He attributes the Natchez origin story to the common assumption that all good blues musicians are from Mississippi.¹³

Documentation can confirm that in 1930, Geechie Wiley appeared a fully mature musician in Jackson, MS. At this time, she had probably settled in Jackson. She was likely married to or at least living with Charlie McCoy (May 26, 1909-July 26, 1950), a popular hokum performer.¹⁴ Wiley has also been romantically linked to Casey Bill Weldon (July 10, 1909-196?), a previous spouse of Memphis Minnie (June 3, 1897-August 6, 1973).¹⁵ If Geechie was, indeed,

¹¹ Candace Bungard, e-mail message to the author, September, 29, 2010.

¹² Wardlow, e-mail message.

¹³ Marcus, "Who Was Geechie Wiley?," 82-83.

¹⁴ Paul Oliver, "Hokum," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, ed. Barry Kernfeld, in Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/J205000> (accessed April 7, 2011). Hokum acts were amusing musical routines performed first on stage, then in traveling shows like minstrel and medicine shows, and circuses.

¹⁵ Paul Oliver, "Mining 'The True Folk Vein: Some Directions for Research in Black Music,'" *Black Music Research Journal* 5 (1985): 27.

Pearle, the supposed relationship with Casey Bill Weldon could, in fact have been confused with her connection to a Will Weldon who resided with Shade while he and Ransom were still married.¹⁶

Ishmon Bracey met Wiley in 1930, later reporting that she had been performing in a medicine show. Even if his recollection was partly incorrect, Wiley was definitely playing publicly and perhaps touring whether in this medicine show, on stage, at jook joints, or other venues. As a performer, Wiley was learning traditional songs, melodies, and lyrics as well as writing her own. She had a following and a professional network. Through these channels, she came to the attention of H. C. Speir.

Speir was a music store owner in Jackson, MS as well as a part-time talent scout for the race records division of various recording companies, including Paramount. Speir alerted Paramount of Wiley's musical skills, and in March of 1930, Wiley traveled to Grafton, Wisconsin, probably accompanied by Speir and her duet partner and "traveling companion"¹⁷ Elvie Thomas.¹⁸ Thomas, too, is a historical enigma beyond her two, possibly three sides with Wiley. Based on their recordings, it is likely that the two had worked closely with each other. The theatrical-sounding spoken interchange preceding "Pick Poor Robin Clean" implies a skit or other kind of act that they may have performed together. During this trip, in addition to the two songs backing Thomas (12977: "Motherless Child Blues" and "Over to My House"), Wiley also recorded two solo tracks, "Last

¹⁶ Bungard, e-mail message.

¹⁷ Marcus, "Who Was Geechie Wiley?," 80.

¹⁸ John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Unknown Bards: The Blues Becomes Transparent About Itself," in *Best Music Writing 2009*, ed. m Marcus (USA: Da Capo Press, 2009): 31.

Kind Words” and “Skinny Leg Blues” (12951). The following year, Wiley recorded two more songs, the duet (probably with Thomas) “Pick Poor Robin Clean” and another solo, “Eagles on a Half” (13074). According to Wardlow he is possibly the only musician Paramount re-called from Mississippi other than Charlie Patton.¹⁹ After recording these tracks, Geechie Wiley and Elvie Thomas disappear from records found to date. Paramount did not have the resources or will to develop the “down home,” “authentic” sound Wiley provided because they were a small recording company and female vaudeville blues singers were still very popular.²⁰ Wiley presumably returned to Mississippi and continued to play in her chosen venue. A Mr. Wiley of Oxford, MS who claimed to be Wiley’s distant relative, told Wardlow that Geechie died around 1940.²¹

Geechie Wiley likely made a career as a rural songster. As such, she was part of a widespread musical tradition in the Post-Reconstruction era that included many early blues singers like Charley Patton. Some songsters such as Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly) were discovered by scholars like Alan Lomax and propelled to stardom. Most others remained in the undocumented tradition, eclipsed by the blues musician both professionally in the early decades of the twentieth century and in scholarship in the years since. However, the songsters’ musical tradition is an important component of African-American secular music. Howard W. Odum, in his 1911 study of African-American folk songs related how professional African-American musicians label themselves: the “songster” sang

¹⁹ Wardlow, e-mail message.

²⁰ Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 173-4.

²¹ Ibid.

and composed songs; “musicianer” was a master instrumentalist, usually playing banjo or fiddle; finally, the music “physicianer” was a combination of the two, who travelled and played music.²² Songsters played at a wide variety of events, from dances and barbeques to traveling medicine and minstrel shows. These last two venues were important for the exchange of ideas and repertoire between musicians from different geographical origins and different races. Given their participation in and contributions to these shows, Paul Oliver argues that songsters were once a very important part of American popular music.²³

Songster repertoire reflected diverse sources. Once they refined a style, it varied little throughout the rest of their careers. This also means that, throughout their career, they often played songs from their youth or when they were beginning to learn music. Nevertheless, they were also expected to keep up with popular trends and changes in tastes in popular music. They were always adding new items to their songbooks. Songsters were expected to play for many occasions. The inevitable result was that their repertoire included many types of songs: ballads, dance-tunes, reels, minstrel songs, ragtime, popular songs, blues, and spirituals. Above all, they were performers and entertainers with a keen awareness of society and an audience, well-versed in the classics and sensitive to

²² Howard W. Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 24, no 93 (July-September 1911), 259.

²³ Paul Oliver, “Songster (ii),” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/26212> (accessed November 24, 2010); Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 20-22, 70, 107-109, 264; Jeff Todd Titon, *Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*, (Urbana: University of Chicago Press: 1977), 56.

new musical trends. It is a testament to their talent and efforts that their music is remembered and performed today.²⁴

Wiley recorded as part of Paramount's famous 12000 race record series; one notable peer who recorded on this label was Charley Patton. A comparison of issue numbers—Patton's 12953, 12972, and 13070 and Wiley's 12951, 12977, and 13074—suggests that Patton and Wiley recorded in Grafton around the same time, and even knew each other.²⁵ The proximity of their recordings might strengthen the comparisons scholars make between the two.²⁶ Other Paramount artists recorded at this time were Blind Lemon Jefferson (12946), the Norfolk Jubilee Quartette (12957), Blind Willie Davis (12979), Rudy Foster (12981), and Skip James (13072).²⁷ The most frequent recording artist close to Wiley's sessions in Grafton was definitely Patton. Interestingly, a pianist and singer named Arnold Wiley recorded two sides numbered 12955. He also recorded previous and subsequent tracks with his sister Irene.²⁸ Upon further investigation, Irene and Geechie are indeed different women, and probably not even closely related. The sibling Wileys were from Chicago, and Irene's voice bears no resemblance to Geechie's.²⁹

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Paramount Advertisement June 30, 1930; Paramount Advertisement September 15, 1930; Paramount Catalog 1932, the Mike Hatfield Collection, ParamountHome.

²⁶ Kent, liner notes.

²⁷ Hatfield Collection; Paramount Advertisement 1934, Alex van der Tuuk Collection, ParamountHome.

²⁸ Francis Wilford-Smith, liner notes, *Mama Don't Allow No Easy Riders Here Strutting the Dozens Classic Piano Rags, Blues & Stomps 1928-35*, Yazoo Records 2034, 1998.

²⁹ Information in this paragraph is drawn largely from the Paramount Company's advertisements. Reproductions of these pages are located in Appendix B.

Advertisements display Wiley in different lights. Operollo Phonograph Co.'s June 1930 Paramount ("The Popular Race Record") advertisement features Wiley's first album with Chocolate Brown, Tenderfoot Edwards, Charley Patton, Washboard Walter and His Band, and Arnold Wiley. This list is introduced by the provocative question "Are You SATISFIED?"³⁰ A paragraph following offers these artists to alleviate the dissatisfied customer. In September 1930, the Artophone Corporation listed Thomas and Wiley's record on a page under the heading "Popular Paramount Records Everybody Likes."³¹ This advertisement also lists "Race Records" and "Old Time Tunes" and includes other notable female musicians like Alice Moore and Ida Cox. F. W. Boerner Co. shows Thomas and Wiley's disc in a "New Blues" section: "Just off the press... Get Them While They're Hot."³² Other artists are advertised variously: "Worth trying" (Buck MacFarland), "The Piano is Great" (Rudy Foster), and "New Star" (Charley Jordan). This page features many larger ads, most of which feature women musicians: Memphis Minnie (also frequently compared with Wiley), Ma Rainey, Bessie Mae Smith (sic.). Two years later (1934), this same music seller advertised Wiley's final record with many others for a reduced price (three for \$1).³³ Labeled as "Snappy Blues," these listings are flanked by "selected sermons," "beautiful spirituals," "piano blues," and "hot dance tunes." Perhaps the discounted sale price indicated that her final record did not sell as well as the previous ones.

³⁰ Paramount Advertisement June 30, 1930, Hatfield Collection. Emphasis in original.

³¹ Paramount Advertisement September 15, 1930, Hatfield Collection.

³² Paramount Advertisement mid-1930, Hatfield Collection.

³³ Paramount Advertisement 1934, van der Tuuk Collection.

Wiley's life comes into slightly better focus through these details. Knowledge of her possible origins give probable location and an approximate date for her birth and residence. Her profession illuminates the nature of her career and life in general. The context of the Paramount records advertisements add some specificity to her best-documented year and illuminate more generally the lives of musicians like Wiley in the 1920s and 1930s. When woven together, all of this information, answers part of the question: "Who was Geechie Wiley?" There is still more to know, and Wiley's music can provide much of this information.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Philosophical Issues

Notating the rhythms of African-American music is a difficult task to undertake. Paul Oliver advises that, when working with vocal performances in this style, the transcription must represent “a compromise between song and speech as it is heard and the means of conveying the words in text.”³⁴ Thomas Brothers discusses many obstacles in his article “Ideology and Aurality in the Vernacular Traditions of African-American Music (ca. 1890-1950).”³⁵ The speech-like character of this music combined with its vernacular, unwritten quality, creates problems, for example polyrhythm, the concept of a “piece” and non-Western treatment of harmony. One of the subjects he returns to frequently is the speech-like quality of singing. The “more casual organization of pitch and time” makes it difficult to accurately transcribe the heard rhythms into a rigid notation.³⁶ Because of the “compromise” necessary and the “casual organization,” the distance between the sound of the music and the notated transcribed pitches becomes very difficult to navigate.

The process of transcription involves even more complications than addressing only these obstacles. Political and ideological issues exist that make transcribing blues music an even more philosophically loaded endeavor.

Transcription is, by nature, a flawed art, one can never express every aspect of the

³⁴ Oliver, *Songsters*, ix.

³⁵ Thomas Brothers, “Ideology and Aurality in the Vernacular Traditions of African-American Music (ca. 1890-1950),” *Black Music Research Journal*, 17 no. 2 (Autumn, 1997): 169-209.

³⁶ Brothers, 173.

recorded performance perfectly. Scholars have identified and examined sensitive issues that arise in transcribing this kind of music. Kofi Agawu brings up many of the ethical and philosophical issues in his article “The Invention of ‘African Rhythm’.”³⁷ He impresses upon the reader that notation of African rhythms is a delicate and sensitive process. Notation is by nature subjective and changes the meaning of the music object as it transduces action and sound into symbols. These symbols, then, are laden with layers of meaning and description—a supplement, and external addition that is not equivalent to the original, but may seem so.³⁸ In all this, Agawu maintains that the idea of “African Rhythm” is an invention of Western musicologists, and this forced difference should be replaced with an ideology of sameness. In the end, he advocates exchanging the invented “African rhythm” for insider (or “emic”) points of view.

Some scholars make the argument that this music was compromised by the recording process; however Davarian L. Baldwin states that despite this possible “adulteration,” race records were still able to “resonate” with the African-American public.³⁹ When examining music from this era, it is important to note that the inauthenticity of recording is inevitable. Records were mediated by record companies. In addition to removing the musicians’ creative agency, these recordings can only capture the sound in an unnatural condition. The natural

³⁷ Kofi Agawu, “The Invention of ‘African Rhythm’,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Autumn, 1995): 380-395.

³⁸ Jaques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 144-145. Derrida’s definition of the supplement refers to the relationship between speech and written words. Speech and thought are closely linked, but once speech is written down, it becomes a set of symbols, becoming a thing also of imagination, and further distanced from the thought that it is meant to represent.

³⁹ Baldwin, 172.

venue for the performance of these songs simply cannot be recreated in a studio.⁴⁰ The recording cannot transmit the initial intention, purpose, and reaction to the music. However, these discs do provide some social insight that the music cannot. Recordings reflected the new empowerment of black musicians and society as they began to undermine the white authority.⁴¹ The African-American population was seen as both producer and consumer of these commodities, and therefore attained a modicum of cultural capital in this musical economy. Musicians defined their music, though mediated by record companies. Black consumers then re-defined it with demand. The intersubjectivity of the music industry shown in the recording process changed the meaning of records in this era. These records reflect an artificial, adulterated, compromised kind of music. However, they also provide a concrete example of the empowerment of the black community and black musicians and their agency in defining themselves and their music. The music was certainly mediated by the white authorities, but it is ultimately the black consumer and musicians that created and shaped it. While records carry this political baggage (both positive and negative), they still maintain their original function: recording music. These mediated and symbol-laden discs are the only artifacts that we as scholars have for transcription. They are taken as legitimate resources, and we honor them with our efforts in using them to make tools like transcriptions and analyzing the musical information they convey.

⁴⁰ In this way, musical recordings already display some of the ideological distance between thought and sound as described by Derrida.

⁴¹ Baldwin, 172.

I worked against not only the geographical distance from the subject, but also chronological, economical, and racial distance. Because of this, I needed to carefully handle my treatment of Wiley and her music so as not to “colonize” or “ghettoize” them, violating Wiley’s already reduced agency in her recording. To increase the sensitivity of my study of Wiley’s music, it is also important to understand the many of the cultural and political attributes of recordings as cultural artifacts. Because the music industry was dominated by Caucasian authority, the African-American performers’ agency and power were reduced. In both my transcriptions and my analysis, I attempt to accurately depict and give meaning to Wiley’s music in new century with a perspective drawn from knowledge of the past. It is inevitable, though, that my ears have eighty years of history and social change that will both inform and distort perception.

While the issues brought up by Agawu, Brothers, Oliver, Baldwin, and others helped to inform the meaning of my transcription, there are many ways that my work seems to lie at odds with their conclusions. This most obvious point is that I have not used standard staff notation for my transcriptions. In his own words, “Descriptive notation, whether used by Koetting, Pantaleoni, or anyone else, embodies a putative resistance to the supplement; and it is this impossible attempt to eliminate the supplement that spells the doom of advocates of new notations.”⁴² I do not believe the disadvantages to the notation systems named here apply to my own. My transcriptions do not diverge greatly from standard notation. My modifications reduce non-analogous symbols and notation, bringing

⁴² Agawu, 390.

the supplement a little closer to the actual object. Also, this second set of standard-notation transcriptions brings “the music into a sphere of discourse that is enabled by a distinguished intellectual history and undeniable institutional power,” as Agawu states.⁴³ I acknowledge that all transcription is flawed and supplements the original, not replacing it, so any of these methods is put to best use while listening to Wiley’s recorded music.

Notation

In transcribing blues music into standard Western notation, scholars have cited two major limitations: rhythm and pitch.⁴⁴ In this style of early blues, both of these musical elements tend to be more complex and subjective issues than in Western European art music. Musicologists have devised ways to overcome these obstacles to varying degrees. However, they are all still closely-tied to traditional Western notation. All of the examples used for reference in this study used a five-line staff, and many of these use supplementary musical markings in addition to standard symbols.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 392.

⁴⁴ Titon, *A Musical and Cultural Analysis*; James Bennighof, "Some Ramblings on Robert Johnson's Mind: Critical Analysis and Aesthetic Value in Delta Blues." *Ramblin' On My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 258-280; Scott Ainslie and David Whitehill, *Robert Johnson* (Milwaukee, Hal Leonard Pub. Corp., 1992); Scott Ainslie, "Robert Johnson: 'Cross Road Blues'," *Acoustic Guitar* 20, no. 5 (November 2009): 52-54; Woody Mann, "Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Guitar Style of Charley Patton," *Sing Out!* 46 no. 2 (Summer 2002): 53-57.

⁴⁵ Titon, *A Musical and Cultural Analysis*; Bennighof, "Some Ramblings;" Ainslie and Whitehill *Robert Johnson*, Ainslie, "Robert Johnson;" Mann, "Screamin' and Hollerin'."

Jeff Todd Titon's method as laid out in *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*⁴⁶ is the apparent model for many other transcribers. In the process of transcription, Titon notes the difficulties of transcribing blues pitch and rhythm. He used a slide on a guitar to aid with pitch and variable speed playback to check rhythms. He transposed each transcription so they end on C (for consistency through all transcriptions), also disclaiming the original key and first note at the beginning. Among the standard symbols he identified are fermatas, glissandi (to and from both definite and indeterminate pitches), and tempo markings in $\theta=$ __ format. He uses familiar symbols in nonstandard ways to address pitch and rhythm issues. Upside-down fermatas indicate a pitch held for a shorter duration than indicated (as opposed to longer, marked by a right-side-up fermata). Arrows pointing up or down above a note show that the pitch is slightly higher or lower than the note shown, but not so high as the next chromatic step. Otherwise, his transcriptions resemble standard Western notation practices.⁴⁷

This method offers many positive features as well as highlighting issues to address. Most of these stem from the fact that this is a well-established method to present notated music. The format is familiar to readers. The transcriptions are easy to read and require very little extra explanation or training. Additionally, when working in this medium, a standard set of theoretical tools and processes has existed for years, so analysis and discussion are done easily. Also, by subscribing to the format of established scholarship, the standard notation places

⁴⁶ Titon, *A Musical and Cultural Analysis*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

the music and analytical work in that sphere. Because of these things, I used this kind of notation for some aspects of my transcription.

There are also weak points and obstacles. Many of these I have implied already in my discussion. The transposition of Wiley's songs is not necessary for my discussion. The symbols that Titon uses are still ambiguous. Arrows don't indicate just how much higher or lower a note is from the notated pitch. Fermatas are the same. The durations are not explicit, nor do they indicate when a note is placed slightly *before* a beat. The glissandi to represent slides and scoops do not account for the speed or nuances of the figure. James Bennighof, whose transcriptions of Robert Johnson's "Rambling on My Mind" closely resemble Titon's format, explicitly states the imprecision of this method in a disclaimer on his transcriptions: "All rhythms (especially vocal) are approximate indications of metrical locations, in some cases indicating beats that Johnson may be feeling, more than precisely hitting."⁴⁸ Finally, because Titon is still working within an idiom heavily-laden with symbols, this further distances the visual product from the original recording.

Other transcribers handle this weighty task differently. Scott Ainslie's transcription of Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" and Woody Mann's transcription of Charley Patton's "Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues" were published with the intention that they will be played. Neither author shows any acknowledgement of the rhythmic peculiarities. Their notations of unusual rhythms, unlike Titon, are much more complex. They resemble transcriptions of jazz solos with notes barred

⁴⁸ Bennighof, 268.

across measure lines and uncommon combination of triple and duple subdivisions. Neither of these transcriptions make use of Tilton's symbols for notes and rhythms that do not fall precisely on easily notated beats or chromatic pitches.

These versions offer similar benefits and disadvantages as Tilton's method. They do, again, fall into a standard recognized pattern. They are readable—especially for those well-versed in this kind of transcription. However, the negative aspects still exist. They are even less specific than those mentioned previously. They do not offer indications of off-beat notes, non-standard blue notes, and stylization of ornaments. Expression, in fact, is minimally notated or neglected entirely. For their purposes of performance, these versions likely work well. My work, contrarily, is not intended for performance, so many of the positive aspects offered do not benefit this study.

Transcription Process

In order to discover more about Geechie Wiley and her music, I determined a high level of precision in my transcriptions was important for two reasons. First, my search located no other attempts to document Wiley's music in this fashion. With no other versions to work from, my examination should keep as true as possible to Wiley's original performance. Second, transcriptions are indispensable in the analytical process, removing the temporal element from the analyzed object and aiding the organization of thought. With the tools I discovered, pondered, and honed, I created a modified system of notation with the

aim to make transcriptions that describe Wiley's performance. The notation and symbols I drew from Titon, Bennighof, Ainslie, and Mann helped me create the first drafts of these transcriptions in standard Western notation. The philosophies put forth by Agawu, Brothers, and Oliver helped me stay honest to Wiley's performance. While they created a comprehensive foundation for my work, these resources ultimately fell short for my purposes—they were still not specific enough or descriptive enough. For my analysis, I found that accurately transcribing her vocal rhythms and ornamentation was an impossible task using standard Western notation.

In order to notate Wiley's singing more precisely, I sought an alternative method. It does not diverge greatly from the traditional staff, but instead of symbols to represent musical figures, it relies more on spatial relationships to represent pitch and rhythm. This representation is more graphic, as opposed to symbolic. The added freedom afforded by my system gives it heightened sensitivity to the intricacies of the performance. This new method helped illustrate Wiley's recordings, as approximate rhythms are easier to show on the page and ornaments can be completely notated as opposed to being reduced to a more general symbol. I also feel that my notation, which is less strictly tied to beats and determinate pitches, mediates the space between Western European and American literate musical culture and the African oral musical culture, as the music I am working with does itself. This method does not completely avoid problems that arise in standard notation, however it decreases the distance between the graphic representation and the aural music.

Wiley's guitar arrangements did not pose the dilemma that her vocal performance did, so there was no need to deviate from standard notation. The graphic transcriptions are included along with more conventional transcriptions of Wiley's vocals paired with her guitar melodies. This score illustrates the relationship between the two parts—an integral feature in understanding Wiley's style and compositional approach. These also may be easier for the reader to understand and relate to my analysis of Wiley's music, though the graphic score more accurately depicts Wiley's vocal mannerisms.

Beyond the intellectual difficulties presented above, the process of transcribing old recordings like these is further fraught with difficulties in its execution. Early recording techniques yielded low quality recordings. Paul Oliver acknowledges Paramount's Race series, of which Wiley is a contributor, as particularly bad. In addition to this, the physical discs are eighty years old, and damaged from age and use. To aid my listening, I modified tracks in ProTools to slow the tempo but maintain the pitch. I also used equalizing software to help me hear phrases where an increased mid-range would clear up difficulties. My main instrument for transcription was a keyboard with pitch-bend abilities to aid in transcription of blue notes and slides on guitar. My procedure for transcribing lyrics, rhythm, melody, and guitar were simple. I listened (first at tempo then slowed to half-tempo) and edited the lyrical errors I found. I then turned my attention to the vocal parts and first transcribed the rhythms presented, followed by melodies. When the vocal transcription was finished, I turned my attention to the guitar introductions, bridges, and postludes. The exception to this procedure

was “Last Kind Word Blues.” Its divergent metrical structure (two non-consecutive 2/4 measures toward the end of each verse) was more easily discerned in the guitar solos. These I transcribed first, before attempting the more complex vocal verses.

My first attempts to transcribe Wiley’s singing using a standard notation, even including half-flats and other symbols, had disappointingly inexact results. My research uncovered very few examples that used a non-standard form of notation. Those that did made little headway into describing melodic or rhythmic content. So I re-drew the staff. This method is intended to be more descriptive than prescriptive. Wiley’s vocal style is not well-suited to the regular, clean concepts of pitch and rhythm. My method avoids these constraints and better illustrates how she performs.

Other features were harder to translate. Lyrics are located as closely as possible to under their corresponding pitches. Letters written below a dot on the “score” indicate that particular consonant are elongated (while pitched) by Wiley. “Over To My House” and “Pick Poor Robin Clean” are duets, the latter features Wiley. The accompanying vocal lines (sung by Wiley in the former, presumably Elvie Thomas in the latter) are indicated by a small, right upward diagonal dash the duet notes. On lyrics sheets, bracketed words are an approximation of unintelligible words.

Transcribing the lyrics of Wiley’s and Thomas’s songs was much less complicated as many scholars and collectors have deciphered and published her

words. I again mined sources such as Titon's *Downhome Blues Lyrics*⁴⁹ for "Skinny Leg Blues." Eric Sackheim's *The Blues Line* provided the lyrics of "Eagles on a Half" and "Motherless Child Blues."⁵⁰ Greil Marcus's article "Who Was Geechie Wiley" provided some lyrics for "Last Kind Words Blues,"⁵¹ and in "Unknown Bards," John Sullivan details his efforts to discern Wiley's lyrics for this same song while working as "fact-checker" for Marcus.⁵² Paul Oliver transcribed most of the lyrics of "Pick Poor Robin Clean" in *Songsters and Saints*.⁵³ I use many of these lyrics appear in these published versions. I note important edits that I have made in my analysis.

My graphic representation of Wiley's singing better captures her performance. In my notation system, measures are created on a graph of horizontal (representing time) and vertical (representing pitch) lines. Each line of the vertical element represents one pitch of the scale that Wiley and Thomas use in each song. Each note is represented by a dot, its duration shown by a horizontal line, and embellishments are shown in bends in this line. Waved lines indicate trills. I assigned one pitch used in the tune to each horizontal line. Using these unstemmed noteheads, I found I could graphically depict the pitch relationships as well as ornamentation and expressions with greater fidelity. The beat is indicated by vertical lines. The horizontal location of each dot on or between the beat lines is analogous to its chronological location in the recording. The chronological flow

⁴⁹ Jeff Todd Titon, *Downhome Blues Lyrics: An Anthology From the post-World War II Era* (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1981).

⁵⁰ Eric Sackheim, *The Blues Line: A Collection of Blues Lyrics*, (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1969).

⁵¹ Marcus, "Who Was Geechie Wiley?," 80-83.

⁵² Sullivan, 29-53.

⁵³ Oliver, *Songsters*, 126.

of music and the pitch levels are analogous to the organization of these elements in standard notation.

Key

note



line indicating duration



slurred pitches



pitch inflection



trill



secondary voice



even eighth notes



Chapter 4

MUSICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Geechie Wiley's recordings have many qualities in common. As we hear these tracks now, they are all very low quality. Hisses, pops, and crackles abound. The physical discs are old, so this is expected. Also, there are very few extant copies; for instance, only one known copy of Elvie Thomas's record survives. Anomalies would therefore be difficult to improve digitally. They all have what Greil Marcus calls "that old Paramount sound."⁵⁴ Paramount is known for the notoriously low-quality sound of its recordings. On most recordings, Wiley began playing before the sound engineer began recording, cutting off the first few seconds, and giving the impression of an introductory fade-in. "Motherless Child Blues" and "Pick Poor Robin Clean," however, have special features in their introductions that are discussed in their individual analyses. Typical of early recordings of country blues, each song gradually accelerates as it progresses.⁵⁵ Other than these features, Wiley finds different ways to express each musical thought.

To aid discussion in this chapter, songs in this chapter are discussed by genre to facilitate analysis. Each genre is described before I then analyze each song individually, addressing qualities and issues unique to each. Also, in most cases, transcriptions are presented in Western staff notation. I chose this format for ease of reading and standardization. Those examples that require discussion of

⁵⁴ Marcus, "Who was..?," 82.

⁵⁵ Titon, *Musical and Cultural Analysis*, 153.

melodic ornamentation and expression are presented with both the standard notation and the graphic representation to facilitate the illustration.

The Blues

I use the formal, rhythmic, melodic, and textual analyses of Jeff Todd Titon's *Early Downhome Blues*⁵⁶ as a template for this chapter. He begins with a discussion of form. Most blues are strophic, constructed with twelve-measure verses of three lines. The first two lines of each stanza, designated "A," contain two shorter phrases; the third, "B," contains only one longer phrase. The harmonic progression is the well-known three-chord harmony, using the I, IV, and V chords. These common of early, rural blues, would become some of the more well-known characteristics of all blues music.

Titon addresses rhythmic organization at length. Country blues are usually in 4/4 meter, with the greatest stress on the first beat and a secondary stress on the third. Typically, verses are isometric, though some are heterometric, meaning they contain one or more measures with a different number of beats. Meter is established by the accompaniment, usually a guitar. The most common rhythmic unit of the melody is the eighth note, usually in triplet rhythms, but also commonly duple, and sometimes dotted. Cross-rhythms are often juxtaposed within the melody as well as against the accompaniment. Melodic phrases usually begin between beats; a melodic line generally begins between the third and fourth beats; the second phrase, after the down-beat. The simple harmony provided in the guitar accompaniment is broken into bass and treble components. The

⁵⁶ Ibid., 138-177.

accompaniment often provides rhythms that contrast the sung melody. Also, the accompaniment initiates the accelerating tempo, sometimes gradually, and at other times, abruptly. Titon concludes that “while the accompaniment marks the pulse beats, the vocal gives the impression of floating above them.”⁵⁷

Turning his attention to melodic elements, Titon studies typical blues scales and their functions. Usually these have a range of a tenth. Titon makes a long systematic analysis of which pitches tend to resolve toward others. The blues mode is notated as follows:

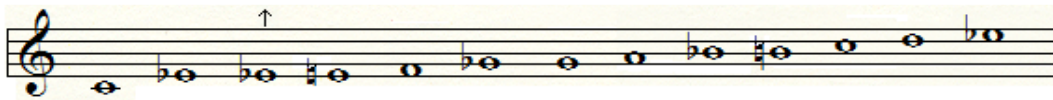


Figure 1. Titon's Blues scale⁵⁸

Melodic contour tends to follow that of field hollers: a short upward leap and a long decent into the tonic note.

Titon next turns his attention to texts and tunes for blues songs and in the subsequent chapter, lyric content.⁵⁹ Many melodies are used repeatedly, and many stanzas of lyrics “float” or “wander” from song to song. He discusses lyrical tropes, including the backdoor man, having the blues, getting on a train, dissatisfaction, and waking in the morning. He also discusses broader subjects for blues: fantasy, boasting about sexual prowess, drinking and gambling, and regret over losing one's lover. Titon's country blues framework is utilized in this chapter

⁵⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 161

⁵⁹ Ibid., 178-193.

to compare and contrast blues written and performed by the songster, Wiley, with those of blues-only musicians.

“Skinny Leg Blues”

Assertive, confident, dangerous, and sexy, “Skinny Leg Blues” is one of Wiley’s most thrilling and shocking pieces. This is the song that led Don Kent to compare her with Charley Patton. In his words, “despite her sensual voice, the persona she presents is as tough as Charley Patton: money before romance, and she sweetly says, while extolling her sexual charms, that she’s calmly capable of killing you.”⁶⁰ Wiley emphasized this song’s dichotomies in juxtaposing a nonchalant vocal style with an aggressive guitar arrangement. This song borrows a verse from “Boe Hog Blues” (spelled various ways), recorded by Blind Willie McTell, among others. Despite the borrowed lyrics, melodically, “Skinny Leg Blues” does not resemble any previous recordings.

This sixteen-measure blues song is structured in two parts of two verses each.

And I’m an itty-bitty mama, baby and I ain’t built for speed.
And I’m an itty-bitty mama, baby and I ain’t built for speed.
Ah, and I ain’t built for speed
I’ve got everything that a little bitty Mamma need

I’ve got little bitty legs, keep up these noble thighs.
I’ve got little bitty legs, keep up these noble thighs.
Ah, keep up these noble thighs.
I’ve got somethin’ underneath and it works like a boar-hog’s eye.

And when you see me comin’, pull down your window blind.
And when you see me comin’, pull down your window blind .
You see me comin’, pull down your window blind.

⁶⁰ Kent, liner notes.

Or your next door neighbor, goin' to hear you whine.

I'm gonna cut your throat baby, gon' look down in your face.

I'm gonna cut your throat babe, gon' look down in your face.

Ah, I'll look down in your face.

I'm gonna let some lonesome graveyard, be your restin' place.

In the first, Wiley describes her attributes, somewhat apologetically: "I'm an itty-bitty mama, I ain't built for speed" and "I've got li'l bitty legs." Although these are not ideal, she proudly retorts that, even with these deficiencies, she has everything she needs, including "something underneath" that "works like a boarhog's eye."⁶¹ Wiley then shifts focus from herself to her would-be lover: "your next door neighbor goin' to hear you whine." After the ecstasy of her company, she continues, "I'm gonna cut your throat, baby. I'm gonna let some lonesome graveyard be your restin' place." No alternatives exist. This is how it's going to be with Wiley. Is it a simple victory? Is it revenge? Does this song have a motivation? She's a capable woman who will love you, then kill you. She is a quintessential jook joint woman, a violent, dangerous black widow.

Musically, "Skinny Leg Blues" resonates closely with Tilton's template. Regular beat, cross-rhythms, and acceleration are apparent and the sixteen-measure blues form is slightly archaic, though not uncommon. The themes of sexuality and violence pervade Wiley's lyrics. She boasts of her prowess using a combination of two blues tropes: "built for speed," and "got everything a woman needs." The melodic contour is close to, but not precisely that of the stereotypical

⁶¹ General opinion is divided about the meaning of this term. Some suggest a talisman with magic properties while others maintain it is a reference to the vaginal opening. Given the sexual context of this piece, the latter is most likely.

field holler (See Example 1.1, p. 76) Although Wiley employs these devices, it is her performance of “Skinny Leg Blues” that bring it into focus.

The singer’s confident sexuality is established in her delivery from the first phrase. Sly, slinky, and languid, her first casual notes rise and waver around the minor third scale degree before slowly descending toward a terminating sliding scoop into the major third an octave lower (See Example 1.1).⁶² She traced this contour twice more, then in the final, contrasting phrase, Wiley at last settled on the major third after alternating it with the minor third and tonic. The second verse, which expresses similar sentiments as the first, follows almost the same melodic arch (See Example 1.2). The third verse changes this pattern. She began directly on the flattened third each time, forgoing the “Aah” of the first verse’s third phrase. The added repetition and lack of hesitation emphasize her intentions. This verse is far more declarative than the previous. The melody is more articulated, and the phrase-terminating descents are more incisive. She also colored the last phrase (“Or your next door neighbor goin’ to hear you whine”) with a descending melisma on the second syllable of “neighbor,” as if demonstrating her lover’s moan (See Example 1.3). Finally, and with absolute nonchalance and morbid composure, Wiley condemns her lover to death at her own hands as she watched the life leave his eyes. Melodically, nothing of interest

⁶² The character and manner of delivery of this melody is unlike the style employed by musicians at this time—male, female, self-accompanied guitarists, and soloists backed by an ensemble. Memphis Minnie, Wiley’s most similar and most notable peer, tended toward much clearer pitch and rhythm. Even in more relaxed songs like “Down in New Orleans” and “You Wrecked My Happy Home” Memphis Minnie’s phrases have a sense of direction and forward motion. Contrarily, Wiley does not succumb to the impulse of time, maintaining a casual orientation between her notes and the beat.

happens in the final verse—Wiley allows the lyrical content to take central stage, and ends on a major sonority.

Wiley's guitar accompaniment is not as mediated as her vocal performance. From the introduction, the bipolarity of her character is much more evident. She attacked the guitar strings with sharp twang of the bass notes that contrasts with timid treble melodies that misdirects the harmony by using the minor blues third (See Example 2.1, p. 78). This exciting musical idea is followed by a swung boogie-bass pattern in the fifth measure (See Example 2.2). The decidedly major sonority clashes with the wavering tonality of the opening phrase. Jaunty playfulness replaces the hesitant feeling of the first measures. Wiley established this pattern, revisits the first motives, and then toward the end of the introduction, she diverged from both with a passage of even eighth-notes. Not only does the rhythm change drastically, but she jarringly oscillated between the fifth and raised fourth scale degrees (See Example 2.4). She finished the introduction with a chromatic motive outlining the major third using even eighth-notes (See Example 2.5). This turnaround recurs through the rest of the song. The prelude's disparate juxtapositions foreshadow the contrast in emotions inherent in the lyrics.

Although she kept them secondary to the vocal line, Wiley's guitar motives are often melodic. The patterns laid out in the introduction are the foundation of the organically evolving accompaniment that follows. Through the first two verses, the accompaniment comprises mostly broken chords and single notes. In the fourth line of the first verse, instead of the chromatic, even passage

that she played in the introduction, she opted to energize the accompaniment using more dotted, disconnected rhythms. The chromatically contrasting accompaniment returns for her discussion of her “boar-hog’s eye,” but otherwise little changes in the accompaniment pattern in the first two verses. In the second half of the song, the guitar becomes even more bold and aggressive. She increased tempo and interest in the accompaniment before the third verse. At her first mention of closing the blinds, she filled in the harmony and plays a series of block chords in even eighth-notes. During the final verse, Wiley continued to use block chords, then makes the broken-chord bass pattern increasingly syncopated. This change from a regular pattern is unsettling, reflecting the divergent nature of the lyrics. To end, she played a short, almost comical tag ending. This termination, rather than trivializing the previous statements, casts an unsettling shadow over the performance; she is apparently completely unfazed by her murderous intentions. No longer shy and timid, she planned everything out and will kill her lover as casually as she played the tag ending.

Wiley’s “Skinny Leg Blues” persona—the predatory jook joint woman—is a common archetype based on real experience in the rural South. These women were a part of folk legend and subject of song. In reality, they were the actual owners of bars and jook joints, gamblers, and performers.⁶³ Jooks were no places

⁶³ Barry Lee Pearson, “Jook Women” *Living Blues* 34, no. 5 (September-October 2003): 105, 109. These legends include women like Frankie Baker of St. Louis and Ella Speed of Texas. Blind Willie McTell wrote “Delia” about Delia Holmes, a real gambling woman on the East Coast, and Ada Brown’s “Barrelhouse Bessie” probably recounts the exploits of a well-known woman. The archetype of the jook woman is central to Robert Johnson’s “Little Queen of Spades,” Leroy Carr’s “Barrelhouse Woman,” and Buddy Moss’s “Gambling Woman Blues.” Many female blues musicians embodied what Barry Lee Pearson calls “the tough jook woman motif.” Bessie Smith,

for ladies, and society usually censored those who frequented them. A woman who did break these societal constraints was a “self-possessed actor indulging in jook recreation on her own terms rather than as fallen woman or victim.”⁶⁴

Women who attended or performed at these establishments had to “try to act tough,” placing razors in their garters for self-defense.⁶⁵ The women at the jook houses were an integral part of the lore and music that originated in these counter-cultural spaces. In “Skinny Leg Blues,” Geechie Wiley became one of them—but perhaps, like her peers; she was already one of them.

Wiley paired the blues idiom with the jook woman character to create a compelling piece of music. She captured a piece of collective memory—if not an actual event. Using the music of the jook joints, she vividly brought this persona to life through her use of the blues idiom, her vocal execution of her colorful lyrics, and deft support of her guitar arrangement. This preserved piece of musical history is so expressive that it continues Wiley’s legacy and the songster tradition to which she belongs.

“Motherless Child Blues”

Elvie Thomas’s “Motherless Child Blues” is a tender, classic blues song about heart-break. Her only known original work, Thomas treated her lyrics with a sensitivity distant from Wiley’s more aggressive style. Thomas followed many of the established blues characteristics in her vocal performance, including

Memphis Minnie, and Big Mama Thornton were all known to frequent jook joints, where they readily drank, swore, chewed tobacco, and brawled.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 108.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 112.

speech-like rhythms, the field holler contour in each verse's final phrase, the blues tropes in her lyrics, and the harmonic progression. Wiley accompanied in this recording. Her responses to Thomas's calls further exemplify the blues idiom. Their rich union of musical intent creates a passionate and poignant example of early country blues.

My mother told me just before she died,
My mother told me just before she died,
My mother told me just before she died,
My mother told me just before she died,

Oh daughter, daughter please don't be like me,
Oh daughter, daughter please don't be like me,
Oh daughter, daughter please don't be like me,
To fall in love with every man you see.

But I did not listen what my mother say,
But I did not listen what my mother say,
But I did not listen what my mother say,
That's the reason why I'm sittin' here today.

Baby, now she's dead and six feet in the ground,
Baby, now she's dead, she's six feet in the ground,
Baby, now she's dead, she's six feet in the ground,
And I'm a child, I am driftin' 'round.

Do you remember the day, baby, you drove me from your door?
Do you remember the day baby, you drove me from your door?
Do you 'member the day you drove me from your door?
"Go away from here woman, and don't come here no more."

I walked away and I wrung my hands and cried,
I walked away and I wrung my hands and cried,
I walked away and I wrung my hands and cried,
Didn't have no blues I could keep carryin' 'round.

Even this proto-blues shows many of the textual features that would later be standardized. Five particular tropes are evident. The subject of the song is archaic and far-reaching: heartbreak. Additionally, the song's over-arching theme of

“good advice not taken” drives this song. Thomas’s first verse sets the tragic precedent for more explicit references. The phrase “My mother told me just before she died” is a standard invocation in many kinds of music, but is more closely related to the blues. The image of a scorned and down-trodden woman wringing her hands and crying in the last verse is present in blues especially by women. Finally, the idea of traveling after trouble arises is a *sine qua non* of blues. Usually this is on a train, and often it is motivated by injury from a lover. Nonetheless, men and women catch a ride or simply start walking. Thomas deftly wove these images into her song.

Wiley’s introduction draws the listener in from the very first note—a plucked pitch that is allowed to ring for an uncharacteristically long interval. As Marcus describes, “The note is in fact barely a whisper... The sound seems to drift, and then for a long, suspended moment to dip under any suggestion of a theme, to deny that there could be any such thing.”⁶⁶ Just when the note has almost faded away, Wiley continued with a meandering, overlapping melody that implies metric regularity, but is too relaxed for much specificity (See Example 3.1, p. 85). Not until approximately sixteen beats into the song did Wiley decide to be more metrically precise. Finally, she gave the audience some stability with a broken chord pattern that begins to hint at her accompaniment figures and melodic responses (See Example 3.2). Wiley did utilize such a complex sequence in any of her other guitar work. Even the rhythmic peculiarities of “Last Kind

⁶⁶ Marcus, “Who Was Geechie Wiley?” 82.

Word Blues” do not come close to the blindly wandering feeling Wiley captured in these few “measures.”⁶⁷

After her definitive entrance, Wiley continued with an accompaniment pattern that conforms to the standard blues progression. Unlike the verses to follow, Wiley’s introduction is only twelve measures. The first four bars set up the tonality, after which Wiley spelled out the supertonic, then subdominant chords with a boogie bass pattern, then returned to the tonic. The foundation of this line is the standard chord changes (V—IV—I—I). In the first two measures, Wiley played a standard finger picked accompaniment pattern: simple block chords above the bass note of the chord. In the final two measures, she plays a short, pseudo-turn-around that emphasizes the tonic. The notes and harmony of the introduction are not particularly notable, however, its simplicity accentuates the sensitivity of Wiley’s playing. She makes ample use of call and response. Wiley’s responses to Thomas’s sensual voice are calm and subtle, like that of a comforting friend rather than a commiserating companion.

⁶⁷ Marcus, “Who Was Geechie Wiley?” 82.

15
just be- fore she died. My mo- ther told me just be- fore... she died...

21
My mo- ther, told me just... be- fore, she died... My mo-

Figure 2. “Motherless Child Blues,” mm. 15-25: vocal melody, lyrics, and guitar responses

Wiley achieved many effects with her short responses to Thomas’s vocals. The guitar melodies fill gaps left by the sung line. In these moments, Wiley enhanced the mood set by Thomas with her subtle, understated motives. She was repetitive when Thomas was repetitive and became more energetic as Thomas increased her own fervor. Moreover, the short, plucked phrases accentuate the changing harmonies. In the first two, the underlying chords move from E major to E7 to A major; the D-natural makes this clear. In the second two, she returned to E major. In the former of these, she inserted a blues third for color. In the final phrase, she emphasized the tonic with both the fifth and the seventh.

In “Motherless Child Blues,” Thomas and Wiley combine forces to create a song that is as bluesy and tender as the title prescribes. Thomas’s composition follows the standard sixteen-measure blues form. Within this structure, she layers blues imagery with a delicate vocal delivery. Wiley takes Thomas’s ideas and

I didn't have no daddy,
To hold me in his arms.

I say get back rider,
Don't care how you lay.
I say get back rider,
Don't care how you lay.
I wanna tell you I
Can't stay here till day.

I say eagle's on a half, Lord
Baby, in god we trust.
I say eagle's on a half, Lord
Oh, in god we trust.
I love you, daddy, ah,
What you done that for?

In contrast to a chronologically linear narrative, Wiley composed the lyrics for “Eagles on a Half” with the free-association method made famous in African American spirituals as well as blues. “Eagles on a Half” lacks a central plot in loosely related stanzas. Still, Wiley clearly traced a romantic and sexual subject. Referencing wordless sexual ecstasy, she begins by lamenting the fact that she has not called her man’s name. Next, she requests to see her lover’s “old business” that she has piqued her curiosity. Wiley then complains that she is unable to sleep without a good man next to her in the third verse. These three verses make it clear that she is romantically involved with someone. She has a man, though she has not yet enjoyed a sexual relationship with him, despite her repeated pleas. The fourth verse is open to many interpretations: “I say get back, rider. Don’t care how you lay. I wanna tell you I can’t stay here ‘til day.” The

final verse is even more enigmatic. The phrases, “eagle’s on a half” and “in God we trust” are obvious references to a half-dollar coin. Wiley ended this song by returning to her romantic complaint: “I love you, daddy. What you done that for?” Perhaps she mistook what he sees as a business transaction for love. This last phrase establishes why she continues her relationship although she is not satisfied.

Several familiar blues images are mentioned in these lyrics. Wiley’s themes are common: loving without satisfaction and challenging a brown-skinned lover. Wiley stays a “rider,” an experienced lover, the man she is with.⁶⁸ Stating that she can’t stay until dawn is often a coded message indicating that one party is cheating on the other. Finally, a common practice in blues of this era is the cry out to the lover in the final stanza. Wiley’s plaintive cry anticipates later transformations of blues that would offer constructive action to better the relationship. These references tie Wiley’s blues to general life and presage the future of this genre.

Wiley’s vocal composition is typical of blues qualities from the first line. The first note of each phrase is correctly placed: the first phrase begins on the second eighth-note of the third beat, the second phrase begins on the second eighth-note of the measure (marked by asterisks, pp. 90-91). Each of these phrases anticipates and thus emphasizes a normally stressed note. She contrasted swung eighth notes and even in the same phrase. Finally, the overall contour of this melody follows that of a field holler, as is practice in the blues (See Example 4.1).

⁶⁸ Titon, *A Musical and Cultural Analysis*, 180. Part of the power of a term like this is its implied meaning. The listener hears the word and infers its meaning without being explicitly told.

Although this close analysis distracts from a consideration of Wiley’s creativity, her style and genius pervade the piece. She infuses variety into the repetitive vocal melody. Every verse begins on the lowered seventh scale degree, F. Then, the longest note in each phrase is the note a step below the previous (F in m1, E in m5, D in m9), creating a subtle motive within the melody.



Figure 6. “Eagles on a Half,” mm. 12-13, 16-17, 20-21: beginning of phrases showing long notes

Vocally, Wiley emphasized consonants with apparent enjoyment. This styling is especially evident on the Ls of “low” in the first line of the first verse and the first of the second verse (consonants notated next to pitches, pp. 90-91). The emphasized M in “mama” in the second verse’s second line has a similar effect. These voiced consonants can carry pitch and add more emphasis without increasing volume, almost creating a lamenting moan. Wiley also extended the SH of “shame” in the first verse and the first S of “business” in the final line of the second verse. These sibilants roughen these phrases, coloring the emotions with a little bitterness.

Likewise, in her guitar arrangement, although she embraced blues idioms, she maintained her style and creativity. Her driven, aggressive accompaniment is comprised mainly of melodic elements. The initial G-major chord in the bass is complemented in the treble by a melodic line that again features both the major and minor third and lowered seventh (See Example 5.1, p. 92). The most colorful notes of the scale these are also emphasized in the vocal line. The chord progression becomes more evident as each “A” line ends with a tritone leap from the major third to the lowered seventh (See Example 5.2). These motives are present throughout the song. Rhythmic variations provide welcome contrast. While the first phrase is aligned squarely to the beat, the second is much more syncopated. In the first phrase of the second accompaniment figure, Wiley placed the tonic in the bass, and ornaments the fifth with a raised fourth scale degree (See Example 5.3). These two pitches constitute the majority of the upper accompaniment line. Like the previous pattern, each phrase ends with the same tritone leap, and, as mentioned, the final measures are the same. In the final phrase, she emphasized first the tonic of the V chord, then the fifth of the IV chord, and finally the third of the tonic chord, ending on tonic.

“Eagles on a Half” is the final track that Geechie Wiley recorded before disappearing forever. From it we learn that she was a talented composer and musician. She had studied and mastered the blues. Her melodies are beautiful, idiomatic, and passionate. Her delivery is nuanced and practiced. The guitar arrangements she wrote for herself are creative—never did she rely solely on a simply strumming a harmonic progression. Her sense of rhythm and dissonance

bring character and vivacity to her accompaniment. And she obviously understood the relationship between her voice and her guitar. Despite “following the book” almost to the last detail, Wiley nevertheless produced a refreshingly original blues.

Guitar Rags

The fad for ragtime music was fiercest around the turn the twentieth century. Although now known mainly as a genre for piano, even in the early twentieth century, rags were performed by and composed for many kinds of instruments including guitar, mandolin, banjo, accordion, and xylophone.⁶⁹ It was also popular for ensembles: brass band, orchestra, violin and piano, and combinations such as two mandolins, guitar, and piano.⁷⁰ Rags also featured vocalists. In fact, any piece of music could be “ragged” by introducing a steady oscillating bass with a syncopated melody. Of ragtime string instruments, the guitar is superior.⁷¹ It is also possible that they developed in rural areas at the same time as early piano ragtime.⁷² The popularity of ragtime as a genre for guitarists reached its height in the mid-1920s through the 1930s. The rise of these ragtime guitarists was inspired by the work of such musicians as Big Bill Broonzy, Blind Blake, Mississippi John Hurt, and Reverend Gary Davis.⁷³ Guitar rags have the same structural characteristics as piano rags as both instruments

⁶⁹ Jerry Snyder, “The Basics: Introduction to Ragtime Guitar,” *Acoustic Guitar* 18, no. 8 (February 2008): 40; Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 10.

⁷⁰ Berlin, 10.

⁷¹ Oliver, *Songsters*, 29-30.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷³ Snyder, 40.

have the capability to play bass lines, chords, and melodies simultaneously. Musically, the same features are found as well: a steady, oscillating bass pattern; a middle range that plays harmony; an emphasis on upbeats, frequent syncopation that contrasts the bass. In taking so many qualities from the earlier piano compositions, the guitarist exploits a wide range of the instrument's capabilities. Virtuoso technique is necessary to play guitar rags, so they inherently showcase the player's talent. These pieces are closely connected with coon songs which arose with blackface minstrelsy in the 1840s and continued in popularity at the turn of last century. The combination of dance rhythms, energetic melodies, and steady beat, delivered by a mobile instrument such as guitar, elevated this genre in any songster's toolbox.

Wiley and Thomas's "Over to My House" and "Pick Poor Robin Clean" embody the characteristics of ragtime in general, but they are also distinct from other ragtime guitar recordings of this era. Wiley's peers Charley Patton and Robert Johnson both recorded guitar rags as well; however, Wiley's are distinct. Patton's rags, like his 1929 Paramount recording "Shake It and Break It" (which in fact shares lyrics with or loaned lyrics to "Over to My House") feels more relaxed because its tempo is slower than the songs addressed in this study. Patton's vocal delivery is less sharply articulated and accented than Wiley's, and his guitar work is more rhythmically and melodically regular, with less distinction between the treble and bass. Robert Johnson's more animated "They're Red Hot" (Vocalion, 1936) shares structural and stylistic characteristics with "Pick Poor Robin Clean." While Johnson's interpretation of ragtime is more energetic than

Patton's, Johnson still does not include the level of raw, unrefined intensity that Wiley and Thomas infuse into their work.

These two songs are distinctive in Wiley's tiny output in many ways. First, they are the only examples of guitar duets and the only vocal duets in Wiley's catalog. Unfortunately, assigning guitar parts to performers is impossible; however, because these arrangements sound like Wiley's others, I will analyze them as hers and differentiate between the primary and secondary parts as necessary. Second, these are the only two songs that are not original to Wiley or Thomas. Both of these songs are ragtime standards. Third, and reflecting their ragtime genre, these are the only songs that feature refrains.

"Over to My House"

"Over to My House" is the second track on Thomas's 1930 release. Wiley accompanied her on guitar and with some vocals. Many songs use the trope "come over to my house." A jazz standard, it has been recorded by artists like Jay McShann and Julia Lee. The earlier blues versions were recorded by Blind Willie McTell and Oscar "Buddy" Woods. Woods's 1937 recording, a guitar and piano ragtime duet, is closest to Thomas's and Wiley's, even using many of the same lyrics. Thomas and Wiley's track is set apart by its punchy delivery.⁷⁴

Come right on over to my house, ain't nobody here but me.
I been listenin' for the last six months, and I could not see.
'Cause you can shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
Throw it out the window, run and catch it 'fore it falls
On over to my house, ain't nobody here but—I'm cryin'—ain't nobody
here but me.

⁷⁴ Kent, liner notes.

Come right on over to my house, cause there ain't nobody here but me.
I've been listenin' for the last six months, and I could not see.
I said you need not think because you're li'l and cute.
I'm gonna buy you a fox-black suit.
Come right on over to my house, ain't nobody here but—I'm cryin'—ain't
nobody here but me.

Come right on over to my house, 'cause there ain't nobody here but me.
I've been listenin' for the last six months, and I could not see.
When I was sittin' in the parlor, just a strummin' and [playin'],
I wasn't too drunk to hear the backdoor slam.
Come right on over to my house, ain't nobody here but—I'm cryin'—ain't
nobody here but me.

Come right on over to my house, cause there ain't nobody here but me.
I've been listenin' for the last six months, and I could not see.
I'm gonna grab me a picket offa my back fence,
Gonna whip it 'round your head until you learn some sense.
Come right on over to my house, ain't nobody here but—I'm cryin'—ain't
nobody here but me.

Come right on over to my house, 'cause ain't nobody here but me.
I've been listenin' for the last six months, and I could not see.
I said ashes to ashes and sand to sand.
Ev'ry married woman's got a backdoor man.
On over, baby, to my house, ain't nobody here but—I'm cryin'—ain't
nobody here but me.

“Over to My House” is a very formulaic, repetitive song. Each verse contains four lines; the first, second, and fourth of these never change. The third phrase varies in each verse and contrasts the other three drastically. Melodically, it follows a similar pitch contour each time; however, each verse makes use of different lyrics. Harmonically, it differs from the others and is the most interesting of the four. Many standard African-American themes are found in these lyrics. The most interesting is the juxtaposition of sacred and secular in the final verse. The obvious biblical reference, “Ashes to ashes and sand to sand,” introduces the

very secular, sexual, immoral maxim: “every married woman’s got a backdoor man.” The repetition and the familiar references reflect earlier ancestors of ragtime, which would place the origin of this song much earlier than the era ragtime, deep in the lineage of songsters.

Wiley’s vocal contribution to “Over to My House” is different from her others in many ways. Most obviously, she took the secondary role of enhancing Thomas’s singing. Wiley adds her voice almost exclusively at the ends of phrases. These insertions follow the voice-leading of the chord changes. These descending chromatic passages emphasize the most harmonically charged pitches of the progression.

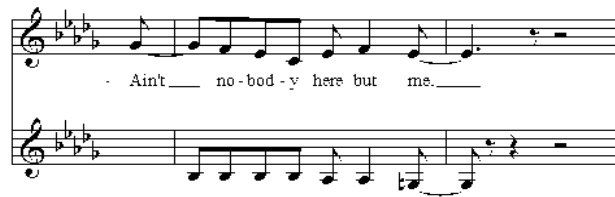


Figure 7. “Over To My House,” mm. 34-36, vocal harmony

Furthermore, Wiley reversed her usual approach to the secondary voice. In other patterns, Wiley used a vocal-influenced melody in her guitar work. Here, she takes on a more instrumental quality, less song-like and lyric-driven. Her vocal accompaniment of Thomas’s song displays Wiley’s keen sense of musical structure and her role in “Over to My House.”

Wiley’s accompaniment pattern places it squarely in the ragtime genre. The Wiley-esque accompaniment begins true-to-form with an introduction that traces out the melodies to follow. The melodic passages that appear in the introduction, bridges, and intermittently throughout are imitations of the vocal

mannerisms of Thomas’s melody. This is illustrated in the inflection of “I’m cryin’” at the end of each verse is reflected in the slide of the corresponding note in the guitar melody (See Example 6.1, p. 99). The secondary guitar part supports the first in its melodic passages. These moments of prominence for this part are very similar to those Wiley sang. Either the secondary guitar plays a close harmony figure, or it supplies a chromatic counter-melody.



Figure 8. “Over To My House,” mm 14-17:
guitar harmony



Figure 9. “Over To My House,”
mm. 12-13: guitar counter-melody.

Guitar melodies are clearly audible when present; however, the accompaniment figures are less audible. The low quality of the recording as well as the secondary nature of the accompaniment in this song create challenges for the transcriber.

The general pattern contains the requisite ragtime rhythms: the treble is syncopated, and the bass marches along steadily.



Figure 10. “Over to My House,” guitar accompaniment basic rhythm

The syncopation here is not as explicit as in many other guitar rags, but the subtlety also allows the vocal duet more prominence.

The musical elements of the contrasting third phrase of each verse come together to create a strong climax. Thomas’s vocal melody is much simpler through this passage. The pitches vary less and the rhythm is a string of eighth notes. The one exception to her background approach to her harmony is one of the transitions from the third to fourth line. She extends the chromatic scale into the fourth phrase, anchoring the two thoughts together and echoing the previous lyrics. The effect is startling and a bit eerie, but pleasant to the ear.

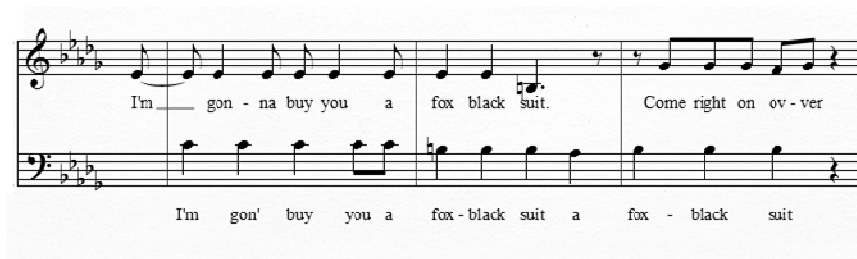


Figure 11. “Over to My House,” mm. 47-49: harmony in third phrase with echo

To emphasize the delivery of the vocal, Wiley and Thomas broke the previous rhythm to replace it with stop time. This pattern is especially audible in the last, lyrically jarring verse. The stop time also emphasizes the harmonic progression and its voice-leading. The total effect of the cooperation of musical ideas is the clear delivery of lyrics and harmonic energy.

“Over to My House” shows a completely different aspect of Wiley’s musicianship. The guitar duet is subjugated by the vocal melody. The secondary guitar almost disappears into the accompaniment. Wiley’s vocal harmonies imitate the guitar harmonies. In sum, Wiley completely relinquished control of this piece, and she allowed the guitar to define the vocal. Wiley’s sense of ensemble balance is evident in her vocal delivery in? “Over to My House.”

“Pick Poor Robin Clean”

The first track on her 1931 record, “Pick Poor Robin Clean” delivers a snappy, showy performance. For this duet, presumably with Thomas, Wiley leads with a brash, rural tone and accent, and Thomas matches with an upper vocal harmony that follows almost completely parallel to Wiley’s comical melody. The lyrical reference to “nigger” and “coon” points to this song’s origins in the early twentieth century or before as it is, again, typical of minstrelsy. Though likely in many songsters’ repertoires, a particularly famous version of this song was recorded earlier by Wiley’s more notable songster peer, Luke Jordan. The two recorded versions are quite similar, although the fidelity of Jordan’s Victor recording is higher, his guitar accompaniment is less dense, and he sings solo. However, Jordan lacks the intensity of the two women who really exercise their strong sense of rhythm in this rag. Either way, “Pick Poor Robin Clean,” according to Ralph Ellison, “was inevitably productive of laughter.”⁷⁵ With the ragtime assets and fierce rhythmic delivery, Wiley and Thomas presented us with a tune that highlights serious contemporary issues in a comic style, further defining the Wiley musical identity.

Another apt song choice for her profession, “Pick Poor Robin Clean” has an “eloquent symbolism” within this socially acceptable venue for satire.⁷⁶ Wiley and Thomas begin with a light-hearted skit:

“Hello there, Geechie!”

⁷⁵ Quoted in Oliver, *Songsters*, 126.

⁷⁶ Oliver, *Songsters*, 126; Lawrence Cohn, *Nothing But the Blues: The Music and the Musicians* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 132.

“Hello there, Slack!”
“What’re you doin’ down here?”
“Well, I’m just down here tryin’ to play these boys a little hot robin.”
“Let me hear it, then!”

The playfulness of the characters is evident, setting the listener up for a brief, jaunty musical journey. It also possibly indicates that this song was part of a larger set the two women may have performed in a show. Songs like these are full of symbols that were familiar to their audiences. Metaphors allowed Wiley and Thomas to comment on much more serious subjects in this song using the ragtime style. “Pick Poor Robin Clean” features many of the aspects that were used in other such show songs; specifically bragging, hustling, and eating.⁷⁷ The repeated refrain of picking poor robin is a reference to the black labor force being abused by the more powerful white society. The jaybird laughs at the poor position of African Americans in the economy.⁷⁸ Despite the grave nature of the subtext, the upbeat delivery of the piece shows an unbroken spirit and resilience. In Henry Louis Gates’s terminology, this song is musical signifying at its finest.

Wiley and Thomas continue the cavalier tone of this rag in their vocal performance. The vocal melodies emphasize the energetic rhythms of ragtime that Wiley delivered with a brighter, more showy tone. Each refrain begins with an extended anacrusis that leads to on-beat quarter notes, but the phrase swiftly gives way to a syncopated termination.

⁷⁷ Oliver, *Songsters*, 99.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

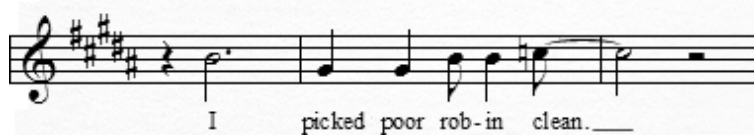


Figure 12: “Pick Poor Robin Clean,” mm. 16-18: vocal rhythms

This feature is continued and extended in the verse, as even fewer of the melodic notes land directly on the beats. Wiley interrupts her normal song structure with a verse of scat singing. This style of this section evokes popular white music from this era. It is unique and jarring, but a pleasant deviation from the rest of this repetitive song. While the melody and syllables are not intrinsically interesting, the brighter tone Wiley chose and vowels flavor this section like other popular music of the day. Wiley’s chosen aesthetics keep toes tapping and interest levels high.

Wiley and Thomas supported the playfulness of their vocal duet with a solid ragtime guitar arrangement. Wiley announced the style and intention of the tune in its first few notes. She followed a descending bass line into the tonic of the first note which then leads to a moderately syncopated strumming pattern.



Figure 13. “Pick Poor Robin Clean:” guitar accompaniment basic rhythms

This pattern varies little throughout the piece. The guitar remains a secondary voice with little autonomous melodic material. Even through instrumental bridges, this pattern is the focus, framed by Wiley’s exclamations “Ahhh...” and “Won’t be long now!” This arrangement is very unlike Wiley’s other guitar

compositions. The guitar arrangement of “Pick Poor Robin Clean” is truly an accompaniment.

The virtuosity of these rag guitarists is really showcased in the tune’s harmony. The harmonic element is especially evident in the beginning of the verse. The chord progression is based on a series of dominant seventh chords that follow the circle of fifths: G-sharp7, C-sharp7, F-sharp7, B major, or I V7/II, V7/V, V7. She repeated this progression whenever the guitar plays solo. Her voicing brings out the audible voice leading of the tritones. When the vocals enter, these harmonies become more interesting. This series of chords creates enthralling tension; however, it also creates dissonance with the harmony in the vocal duet. The E-sharp, the third of the chromatic C-sharp7 chord played on the guitar, clashes with the E-natural that Thomas sings. The dissonance of the minor second gives the impression of a blue note created across voices. This detail adds to the allure of this particular performance of this stock tune.

In the turnaround between verses, more attention is drawn to Wiley’s guitar work. She used the same pattern in almost every turnaround and at the end of the first phrase in her solo work. This motive is the only melodic work Wiley performed on the guitar in this piece. In the first half, Wiley used both the major and minor thirds to ornament a descending scalar passage that traces the notes between the dominant and tonic. This motive begins with little rhythmic interest: two quarter notes on the beat. Then she swings into the following measure, using a few different rhythmic ideas.

While these are called *blues* ballads, they are more accurately, ballads in a blues style. This song form is a close antecedent of the blues.

Most blues ballads share several characteristics. For one, many of them share the practice using the same tune for many songs, but modifying it to fit differing lyrics. The most stanza structure was a three-line form: a couplet and a refrain. While the earlier British ballads narrate stories in a chronological sequence, blues ballads relate events, but the plot is not necessarily linear. The sequence is loose and subjective, “celebrating” an event rather than telling a story chronologically. Usually, a song centers on one individual: a folk hero or a biblical figure. One of the most famous of these figures was John Henry. Very few ballads are in the first person.⁷⁹

“Last Kind Words Blues”

Wiley’s “masterpiece,” “Last Kind Words Blues” is one of the few blues ballads appearing on race records. This song enralls scholars and blues audiences alike, intellectually and aurally. Evocative and expressive, retrospective and avant-garde, this song is her most critically acclaimed track and the first she recorded. Greil Marcus asserts that, even if this was her only contribution to blues, “she would never be forgotten.”⁸⁰ Allen Lowe notes that “Last Kind Words Blues” is a “perfectly constructed song that defies the harmonic conventions of the genre” and that it contains “an elaborate logic.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Oliver, *Songsters*, 229-256; David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 41-48.

⁸⁰ Marcus, “Who was Geechie Wiley?,” 80.

⁸¹ Lowe, 70.

Wiley maintained the mystery established with her “elusive biography” in ambiguous genre of this song. “Last Kind Words Blues” is a blues ballad. Each verse is comprised of a rhyming couplet. Wiley narrates events surrounding her lover leaving for the war. Atypically because of the first person perspective, she relates the final narrative of her lover before she herself leaves on a journey. While the form of “Last Kind Words Blues” implies that it is a ballad, the title asserts the song to be a blues, yet very little about its structure identifies it as blues. Wiley did not employ a regular twelve-measure form nor even the older eight or sixteen. Its eleven measures are isometric, separated into two phrases, and two, two-bar inserts appear in the second phrase. Following standard protocol for ballads, no lyrics are repeated save those in the first verse. Harmonically, Wiley’s composition remains stationary and only alludes to harmonic motion.

The last kind word I heard my daddy say,
Lord, the last kind word I heard my daddy say.

“If I die, if I die in the German War,
I want you to send my money, send it to my mother-in-law.”

“If I get killed, if I get killed, please don’t bury my soul
I cry leave me out, let the buzzards eat me whole

When you see me comin’, look ‘cross the rich man’s field
If I don’t bring you flour, I’ll bring you bolted meal.

I went to the depot, I looked up at the sun
Cried “Some train don’t come, gon’ be some walkin’ done.”

My momma told me, just before she died,
“Lord, since the dawn, I thought you’d be so wise.”

The Mississippi River, you know it’s deep and wide,
I can stand right here, see my baby from the other side.

What you do to me, baby, it never gets out of me.
I believe I'll see ya, after I cross the deep blue sea.

While “Last Kind Words Blues” is not actually a blues song, many aspects do establish this song as a precursor of the blues. In fact, Richard Nevins says that “*Last Kind Words Blues* is the perfect example of a modal song on the verge of becoming a blues. The archaic form seen here, adapted to guitar, is the prototype to blues stylings.”⁸² Many of these pre-blues characteristics are evident. For example, the second line of each verse outlines a standard blues melodic arch: they start very high and descend quickly into the tonic (See Example 7.2, p. 114). Also, Wiley took on a declarative rhythm in the last few measures of each verse (See Example 7.3). In addition, she used quarter-tone blue notes liberally throughout the work (notated by asterisks throughout). Furthermore, she seldom placed pitches directly on a downbeat, and never does this occur at the beginning of a verse or phrase (See Example 7.4). Finally, the melody hints at an A A B, call and response, question and answer structure (See Example 7A). The first phrase is comprised of two shorter, similar motives, ending in an upward inflection; the second is longer and completes the thought lyrically and melodically as it ends dramatically on the tonic (See Example 7B). These things are just a quorum of the blues style characteristics that Wiley used in “Last Kind Words Blues.”

Wiley embodied her songster-folk singer identity in this song’s lyrics. While this piece is an original work, in her composition she drew from the collective memory of her peers and ancestors for some words and images. “The Last Kind Words Blues” is obviously a war song from World War I, given its

⁸² Nevins, liner notes.

reference to “the German War.” Wiley began by recounting the final requests of her lover before he leaves for the front. He morbidly describes his instructions for her following his imminent death: send his pay to my mother-in-law, and leave his body for the scavenger birds. If by chance he avoids that fate and comes home, she should look for him to come across the field, he will bring a gift back to her. After musing on this, Wiley sets out on her own journey. She heads to the station. She finds no train there, and in her frustration she cries to the sky that if one doesn’t arrive, she’s going to continue on foot. As she travels on, she remembers advice from her mother—evoking the blues trope, “my mama told me.” She then begins two stanzas of water metaphors. First, the vast Mississippi River and second the deep blue sea separate her from her baby. She can see him now,⁸³ and she’ll see him again when she crosses over, she thinks as she remembers him fondly. The mere retelling of the story creates a heavy feeling of almost physical death. Wiley’s lover is almost resigned to his fate. She remembers her mother’s passing. And finally, she prepares to cross over herself.

Wiley’s vocal delivery is equally as beautiful and eerie as the drama and lyrics it delivers. She spent more musical time between pitches and between beats than in any of her other songs (See Example 7.5). This leaves the listener a little unsettled, drawn back and forth on Wiley’s voice. The beginning of each verse is never quite the same as any of the others. She drew out different notes, words, or beats, bringing different meaning to the melodic shape. Each of these phrases,

⁸³ Marcus disagrees with this text in *Invisible Republic*, p. 204. I hear “see my baby from the other side.” Marcus hears “see my face.” As he explains, “Geechie Wiley can see her face from across the Mississippi River because hers is the only face to see; all those she loves are dead, and there is no hint of community or society, of town and fellowship, anywhere in her song.”

though, ends relatively consistently. She finally reached and stretches a long, high tonic note before leaning into the fifth. This note, however, cannot be left so comfortably—at the last second, she pulled it upward, almost painfully twisting into the minor seventh, cutting it off short. Her emotional angst rings excruciatingly in the ear with these expressions. Following this suspended moment, the second phrase begins with the longest note of each verse. One measure, only containing the highest, longest note of the song, begins a new thought that answers the implied question of the first phrase. Wiley’s approach to the second phrase of each verse changes from its first notes. No longer expository, her blues becomes almost weary at times, with too many words to say. She sang in a more declamatory, speech-like fashion as she closed in on tonic. Then, she ceased her song momentarily, though she continued her lament with the guitar.

The guitar accompaniment deepens the unsettled, other-worldly qualities of this performance. Kent calls it “one of the most imaginatively constructed guitar arrangements of its era and possibly one of the most archaic.”⁸⁴ Wiley began to establish the A-flat minor sonority with alternating E-flat octaves in the bass on each beat. When the melody enters, it foreshadows the vocal melody, but in a way that is more idiomatic to the instrument (see figure 15, below). As she approached and played the climax of the introduction, Wiley focused on the fifth scale degree, using the raised fourth to ornament it (See Example 8.1, p.116). After this passage of eighth-note oscillations and melismas, Wiley returned to an idiomatic melody, echoing it as she would during the sung verses and to fill the

⁸⁴ Kent, liner notes.

gap before the voice enters. As with many of her arrangements, Wiley used this introduction as an accompaniment for her voice as well as the bridge. She decreased and increased energy and articulation as necessary. She also used the guitar accompaniment to increase the tempo at times that she did not sing.

Wiley’s mastery of self-accompaniment is shown in the idiomatic interplay between guitar and voice. As described previously, the melodies used by both are quite similar. However, Wiley’s arrangement is so well constructed that although both the vocal and guitar solos are based upon the same motives, they both present compelling performances. Also, this performance is so well-rehearsed that even when playing the complementary melodies, they sound completely independent of each other. The first two measures are almost identical in both parts, but then they diverge. The voice begins two phrases, four measures, of mostly long, sustained pitches (to take the first verse for example, “... I heard myyyyy daddy sayyyyy. Lawwwwd, the last kind words...”). These kinds of notes are neither interesting nor idiomatic when played on the guitar. So, Wiley ornamented and emphasized the important notes—those the voice sings—chromatically, with even eighth notes. When combined, these two create a harmonically interesting, rhythmic, tension-filled moment that eases and resumes again before passing.



The last _____ kind words _____ I heard _____ my _____ dad-dy say,

The image shows a musical score for guitar and voice. It consists of two staves. The top staff is for the voice, and the bottom staff is for the guitar. The music is in a key with three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The voice part has lyrics: "The last _____ kind words _____ I heard _____ my _____ dad-dy say,". The guitar part features a melodic line that is chromatically ornamented, with eighth notes and slurs. The two parts are highly complementary, with the guitar accompaniment mirroring the vocal melody's structure.



Figure 15. “Last Kind Words Blues,” mm. 1-8 (lower), 11-19 (upper); comparison of vocal and guitar melodies

Following this, Wiley did not fully lift the feeling of looming tragedy. While singing a rocky, jostling, speech-like descent toward tonic, Wiley outlined a similar motive, stuttering toward the E-flat on her the guitar, repeating this after the lyrics run out. She also shifted the energy to the bass. Instead of the alternating octaves, she strummed each beat, infusing motion into the last phrase of the verse, pushing it toward the next.

“Last Kind Words Blues” showcases many of Wiley’s attributes as a musician. The drama related in this ballad is explicit enough to tell a story, but she left enough for the imagination to intrigue the listener or make the audience relate it to their own experience. Wiley’s voice is inviting and sympathetic. She is powerful and vulnerable—an enthralling combination. She presents an old melody, an old lyric with a modern, blues sentimentality and vocal style, mediating the space between blues ballad and blues. As a guitarist, she created a harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically interesting background for her other features. She attacked the guitar melodies with a fiery passion. She deftly switched between duple- and triplet-based eighth note passages. She maintained her steady beat and rhythms while her vocal style is much looser and unrestrained. In sum, she combined all these factors to create a work that takes each part of the

listener's consciousness on the journey with her through the drama of the text and through the evolution of blues. Paul Oliver concludes his chapter regarding songsters and blues ballads elegantly: "Tastes were changing; the ballads, along with the minstrel songs, the medicine show repertoire and the old dance routines, were giving way rapidly to the new idiom, to which however, they played an important part in giving meaning and form."⁸⁵

This analysis shows the wide range of Wiley's musical talent. She had a firm grasp of performance when both singing and playing her guitar. Her compositions have clear melodies and interesting ornaments and motivic figures. When Wiley sang, she used many effects to express her text: vocal color, ornaments, rhythmic variation, and pitch placement. Also, Wiley understood the hierarchy of musical parts at play. Her guitar accompaniments always served the vocal line, only featured as responses or in introductions, postludes, and bridges. Creativity is also one of Wiley's talents that is shown in the combined analysis of her works. Each song has a distinct character, and Wiley emphasized these differences. In this discussion, Wiley presents herself as an expressive, technically-gifted musician and composer, in command of her music.

⁸⁵ Oliver, *Songsters*, 256.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS

Although her career was short, Geechie Wiley's reach was great. Only a few original copies of her recordings exist, but her songs have been re-released countless times, and collectors and blues lovers continue her legacy. Mostly unknown to her peers, she composed and performed some of the most imaginative country blues that exist.⁸⁶ Yet, she was not a part of mainstream blues culture and is not well-represented in scholarship. Because of her complete departure from history after 1931, we must derive information about her using the one most credible source available: her recorded repertoire. From these we can discover who she was as a performer, guitarist, singer, and composer as well as infer possible factors that contributed to the short life of her recording career.

As a guitarist, she performed some of the most creative arrangements recorded in the catalog of country blues. She played her guitar aggressively and with more rhythmic energy. This is especially evident in the two duet guitar rags "Over to My House" and "Pick Poor Robin Clean," which are not original songs. When compared with contemporary recorded versions, one can hear the guitars driving the song forward with their forceful strumming. In addition, she regularly used more melodic figures to accompany herself and Thomas' singing than her peers utilized. With the exception of "Pick Poor Robin Clean," Wiley composed melodies for introductions, bridges, and postludes for each song, often using these same patterns to accompany the vocal part. Often these melodies were the exact

⁸⁶ Kent, liner notes.

ones used for the vocal line. This shows not only her adept finger-picking in translating a melody intended for voice on a very different instrument, as well as her awareness of musical structure and priority—introducing the melody and paving the way for the vocal entrance. Although she modified these patterns for the guitar, but she always did maintain some of the vocal inflection. The introduction of “Over to My House” illustrates this point. Wiley turned up the ends of pitches on her guitar as Thomas did in her singing. However, Wiley did not only imitate vocal melodies, she also created her own melodies on the guitar to contrast the voice. A compelling example of this is found in “Last Kind Words Blues” in which Wiley oscillates chromatic notes to substitute sustained pitches in the vocal melody. Also, the entire accompaniment of “Eagles on a Half” contains completely different material from the sung line. The increased sensitivity to and prominence of Wiley’s guitar work sets her apart from her peers.

The broad range of vocal timbres, capabilities, and techniques Wiley used enhances the character she presented in each song. As mentioned in my discussion, she explored a variety of vocal colors to match moods and styles: a deep chest voice in “Last Kind Words Blues” enhancing the gravity and melancholy of its drama, a more forward placement and brash sound for the confident character of “Skinny Leg Blues,” “Pick Poor Robin Clean,” she uses a more theatrical timbre with a more nasal quality, and “Eagles on a Half” is more throaty, a classic blues vocal color. Wiley is a skilled singer with a good ear. The opening phrase of “Skinny Leg Blues” shows her exceptionally clean intonation in its oscillations between major, minor, and blue thirds. “Last Kind Words Blues”

is rife with precisely bent pitches and a variety of executions of scoops and slides. Rhythmically, Wiley's singing is clean and specific as well. This serves the snappy, sharp melodies of a fast-paced song like "Pick Poor Robin Clean." This precision is even present in Wiley's more speech-like passages, especially in "Eagles on a Half" and "Last Kind Words Blues." Finally, she used repetition and variation as devices to engage her audience. The third "A" line of "Skinny Leg Blues" contrasts the first two iterations. The verses of "Last Kind Words Blues" are very short, so the melodies cycle through quickly. However, Wiley changes the beginning of each phrase, and ornaments passages that are similar with different inflections each time. The notes of "Eagles on a Half" vary the least of these from verse to verse. To counteract the repetition, Wiley emphasized different letters of words, slurred pitches, bent notes, scooped attacks, and stretched and modified rhythms. These techniques keep listeners interested and enhance the drama of s song. The use of nuanced pitch, controlled rhythm, and expressive variation points to a well-trained, intuitive musician.

Wiley's work shows a clear transition from her first to her second recording—even though the different is only one year. Don Kent said, "She seems to represent the moment when black secular music was coalescing into blues."⁸⁷ Her progression through styles and genres is easily illustrated. Her first track, "Last Kind Words Blues" is probably the oldest, and certainly the oldest typed of song. Its ancestors are from pre-nineteenth-century British ballads. "Skinny Leg Blues" flirts with standard blues characteristics, but its form and style have not yet

⁸⁷ Kent, liner notes.

conformed to those that would later define the idiom. Both these tracks belong to musical traditions that had past even by the time she recorded. When she returned to Grafton, however, her repertoire had drastically changed. Her performance of “Pick Poor Robin Clean” illustrates her energetic and driven interpretation of ragtime. The guitar rag was at that time a flourishing trend. Her one true blues song “Eagles On a Half” realizes most standard blues characteristics. Her chosen form, harmony, melody, and subject all evoke a strong connection to the blues as it was and as it would become. Even though she was far from the first black musician to record the kind of repertoire she played, the chronological progression sketched by her solo work shows the metamorphosis that Kent identifies.

The study of Wiley’s music shows that she was a sensitive and agile performer. Each song takes on a very different character both in her vocal performance and her guitar work. She transforms herself for each new story handling each with finesse. The choice of such an evocative nickname indicates her awareness of the performance aspect of music. The ominous drudgery of “Last Kind Words Blues” can be felt in the bass notes of the guitar combined with the slow, painful sound of the melody played above it. When the voice enters, she holds the weight of the world in the dark tone of her voice and heavy articulation. On the other side of the disc, the guitar twangs, and a much younger-sounding, lighter voice proclaims her sexual prowess in “Skinny Leg Blues.” One year later, Wiley performs an almost comical rendition of a peppy guitar rag. The light-hearted duet of “Pick Poor Robin Clean” eclipses the memory of Wiley’s previous

serious tunes. With “Eagles on a Half,” Wiley fully subscribes to the “blues” label under which she is so often categorized. Within the paradigm of the twelve-measure, standard harmonic and lyric structure, Wiley discusses sex, love, and pop culture.

Many factors contribute to her eventual disappearance and lack popularity that her peers—female and male—enjoyed. Based on the shreds of her history that I located, it can be inferred that she lived her life almost exclusively in rural areas, such as Natchez. Outside of her discovery by Speir and recordings with Paramount, she did not attract the attention of those who record history, as her six recordings are the only documentary evidence of her life. Also, is it likely that because she was a woman, her career progress was naturally limited. Travel in general and booking performances were more difficult. According to Wardlow and Marcus, she was probably married, so perhaps she opted to honor her responsibilities to the home rather than continue her life as a musician.⁸⁸ Also, if she was picked up by Paramount in an effort to rival the blues divas of the time, she was involved in an unlikely venture. The vaudevillian, stage personas of performers Bessie Smith or Mamie Smith are difficult to match, let alone surpass, especially without an instrumental ensemble as support. In general, at this time women blues singer-guitarists were not very popular. The contemporary exception to the rule is Memphis Minnie, but she hardly counterbalances the numerous other female performers who achieved no such fame. Finally, while her last record was flavored with her own style, Wiley was not contributing any new,

⁸⁸ Wardlow; Marcus, “Who was Geechie Wiley?,” 80.

novel, or exotic ideas to the Paramount catalog. As any professional songster, she was assimilating the new musical trends. When she recorded, Paramount was already filling its catalog with these popular songs. Wiley's relative obscurity might be a result the fact that Paramount was simply no longer made room or time for her work.

So, who was Geechie Wiley? Regardless of absent documents to tell us more about her, she did live a life and have a career both before and after her sessions in Grafton. We can surmise many things based on the information we do have. She was an independent, confident woman. She was a poet, equally deft with original lyrics as with traditional images. She was a master of a variety of musical traditions: songsters, blues, ragtime. She was a composer and a professional musician. Wiley was probably also a compelling live performer. The evolution of her recordings shows that she kept up with trends to satisfy her audience. The fact that she changed character so frequently suggests that she knew how to keep the attention of a crowd and had some sense of theatrical effects. Also, she probably preferred her rural life to that of a national professional musician because there is no sign that she pursued a career as a recording artist or stayed in the city. She was satisfied with her life as a country songster so much that she disappeared after recording some of the best rural blues of her time.

Several directions have arisen during the course of this writing for the continued study of Geechie Wiley. A more theoretical approach to the analysis would deepen our understanding of country blues and songster methods. I have

not examined Wiley and her music from a feminist standpoint. Juxtaposing Wiley with her peers would create a better picture of women in the recording industry in the early 1930s. More extensive field work might yield the most compelling results. Both the songster and blues traditions are not as strong as they used to be, but they persist in remote areas. Wiley had such a strong character in her music that it would have left a mark wherever she took residence. A research trip to areas around Natchez or Jackson might turn up musicians or relatives who remember Wiley or know her tunes. Perhaps she had a student or child who is still alive and could shed light on her life and music. Older residents might even remember her.

This work and any subsequent endeavors will help orient Wiley in the history of rural African-American music. Wiley is an important part of a network of timeless American music. With increased work, it may be possible to trace her legacy and lineage. In this way, we can learn more about the nature of songsters and country blues musicians. We can knit together a complex definition of who they are, what they do, how they do it, whom they affect, and why. We can preserve a glimpse of a disappearing American art.

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APPENDIX A
TRANSCRIPTIONS

Skinny Leg Blues

no guitar introduction
me 1

1.1: field holler contour

And I'm a little bit of a... be-fo, and I ain't built for speed

I've got a little bit of a... be-fo, I ain't built for speed

1.2: melodic arch repeated in verse 2

And I ain't built for speed

I've got everything that a little bit of a man need

me 2

I've got a little bit of a... keep up these no-ble rights

I've got a little bit of a... keep up these no-ble rights

1.2: melodic arch repeated from verse 1

And I've got something underneath, and it... words like a bear-chin' sars

I've got something underneath, and it... words like a bear-chin' sars

nr 3

And when you see me to walk, pull down your window blind.

And when you see me to walk, pull down your window blind.

1.3 : moan figure

see me to walk, pull down your window blind.

see me to walk, pull down your window blind.

Or your next door neigh - how, go on to hear you when.

Or your next door neigh - how, go on to hear you when.

nr 4

I'm gonna cut your throat to fly, go on to hear you when.

I'm gonna cut your throat to fly, go on to hear you when.

I'm gonna cut your throat to fly, go on to hear you when.

I'm gonna cut your throat to fly, go on to hear you when.

Am, go on to hear you when.

Am, go on to hear you when.

I'm gonna cut your throat to fly, go on to hear you when.

I'm gonna cut your throat to fly, go on to hear you when.

Skinny Leg Blues

Geechie Wiley

♩ = 96

2.1: use of minor/blue third

2.2: boogie woogie bass pattern

6

13

2.3: third complex

2.5: melodic figure emphasizing major 3

And I'm a li'l bit-ty ma- ma...

2.4: oscillating half-step emphasis on 5

18

3

Ba-by, and I ain't built for speed

1

And I'm a li'l bit-ty ma- ma...

22

Ba-by and I ain't built for speed. Ah. And I ain't built for speed

28

I've got ev'-ry thing that a lit-tle bit-ty ma-ma need. I got

33

I'll bit-ty legs. Keep up these no-ble thighs. I got

38

lit-tle bit-ty legs. Keep up these no-ble thighs. Ah.

43

Keep up these no-ble thighs. I got some-thin' un-der-neath, and it

47

works like a boar-hog's eye. And when you see me com - in',—

51

Pull down your win-dow blind. And when you see me com - in',—

55

Pull down your win-dowblind. You see me com - in'. Pull down your win-dowblind.

61

Or your next-door neigh - bor — goin' to hear you whine. I'm gon-na

66

cut your throat ha - by. Gon' look down in your face. I'm gon-na

4

70

cut your throat babe. Gon' look down in your face. Ah.

75

I'll look down in your face. I'm gon-na let some lone-some grave yard

79

be your rest- in' place.

♩ = 108

My mother told me just be - fore she died.

My mother told me just be - fore she died.

My mother told me just be - fore she died.

My mother told me just be - fore she died.

Oh, daugh - ter, daughter, please don't be like me.

Oh, daugh - ter, daughter, please don't be like me.

Oh, daugh - ter, daughter, please don't be like me.

Oh, daugh - ter, daughter, please don't be like me.

Motherless Child Blues

verse 3

But I did not list - en what my mo - ther say.

But I did not list - er what my mo - ther say.

verse 4

But I did not list - en what my mo - ther say.

That's the reason why I'm still in here to - day.

Baby now she's dead, she's six feet in the ground.

Baby now she's dead, she's six feet in the ground.

Baby now she's dead, she's six feet in the ground.

And I'm a child, I am diff - er - tance.

I walked a - way, I writing my hands and cried.

Didn't have no blues I could keep carry - in' round.

I walked a - way, and I writing my hands and cried.

I walked a - way, I writing my hands and cried.

verse 6

Do you remember the day you drove me from your door?

"Go 'way from here woman and don't come here no more."

Do you remember the day, baby you drove me from your door?

Do you remember the day, baby you drove me from your door?

verse 5

Motherless Child Blues Elvie Thomas (vocal) Geechie Wiley (guitar)

♩ = 120

3.1: meandering rhythm 3.2: metric, steady chord pattern

11 *My mo - ther told me*

15 *just be - fore she died.* *My mo - ther told me just be - fore... she died...*

2

21

My mo- ther. told me just— be- fore. she died.— My mo-

26

the told me just— be- fore she died. Oh, daugh - ter,daugh- ter,

31

Please don't be like me Oh daugh-ter daugh-ter Please don't be like me

36

Oh, daugh-ter daugh-ter. Please don't be like me.

41

To fall in love with ev' ry man— you see. But I

47




did not listen what my mo - ther say. But I did not list-en what my mo-ther say.

53



But I did not list-en what my mo-ther say.

58



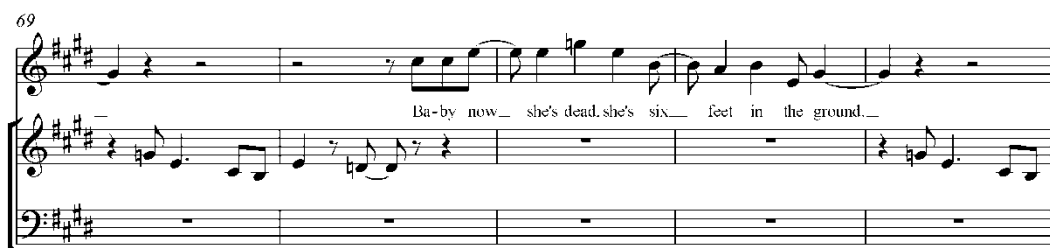
That's the rea-son why I'm sit-tin' here to - day. Ba-by now

63



she's dead and six feet in the ground. Ba-by now she's dead, she's six feet in the ground.

69



Ba-by now she's dead, she's six feet in the ground.

74

And I'm a child. I am drift-in' round. Do you re

79

-mem-ber the day, ha-by, you drove me from your door? Do you re - mem-ber the day, ha-by you drove

84

- me from your door? Do you mem-ber the day you drove me from your door?

89

"Go a-way from here, wo-man, and don't come here no more."

94

I walked a-way, and I wrung my hands and cried. I walked

99

— a - way, 'n'I wrung— my hands and cried— I walked— a - way, 'n'I wrung

This system contains measures 99 through 103. It features a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower two staves. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "— a - way, 'n'I wrung— my hands and cried— I walked— a - way, 'n'I wrung".

104

— my hands_ and cried_ Did - n't

This system contains measures 104 through 106. It features a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower two staves. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "— my hands_ and cried_ Did - n't".

107

♩ = 140

have no blues, I couldn't_ keep tarry - in' round_

This system contains measures 107 through 111. It features a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower two staves. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo marking is "♩ = 140". The lyrics are: "have no blues, I couldn't_ keep tarry - in' round_".

I say, get back rid - er, Don't care how you lay.

This musical notation is on a five-line staff. The melody starts on a middle C (C4) and moves up to a G4 (marked with a red asterisk), then down to an E4, and continues with various intervals. The lyrics are written below the staff, with hyphens indicating that a single note spans multiple syllables. The piece ends with a final G4 note marked with a red asterisk.

I say, see-jet's on a half, lord Baby, in god we trust.

This musical notation is on a five-line staff. The melody starts on a middle C (C4) and moves up to a G4 (marked with a red asterisk), then down to an E4, and continues with various intervals. The lyrics are written below the staff, with hyphens indicating that a single note spans multiple syllables. The piece ends with a final G4 note marked with a red asterisk.

Eagles on a Half

Geechie Wiley

♩ = 120

5.2: tritone to signal chord change

6 5.1: melody uses minor 7, minor 3, and major 3

11 It's a low, it's a low, low, Low down dirt-y sham

16 It's a low, it's a low, low, Low down dirt-y shame.

21 I got a brown skinned man, but I yet to call his game.

25 I've to squat low pa - pa. Let your ma-ma see.

30
I've to squat low pa - pa. Let your ma-ma see. I wan-na see

35
that old busi- ness. Keeps on worr' in' me.

5.3: half-step oscillation on important pitch

40

46

51
twist-ed and I tum- bled. I rolled the whole night long.

55
twist-ed and I tum- bled. I rolled the whole night long. I did-n't have

59
no-da- dy to hold me in his arms.

70

I say_ get back, ri- der.

75

Don't care how you lay. ___ I say_ get back, ri- der. Don't care how you lay.

80

I wan - na_ tell you I can't stay here 'til day. ___

85

I stay ea- gle's on a half, Lord. ___ Babe, in God we trust. ___ I say

90

ea- gle's on a half, Lord. Babe, in God we trust. ___ I love you,

94 ♩ = 134

8
— da-dy, ah. What you done that for?

Over to My House

I'm on o - ver to my house 'cause ain't no-body 'ere but me. I've been list'nin' for the last six months, and I could not see.

I'm on o - ver to my house 'cause ain't no-body 'ere but me. I've been list'nin' for the last six months, and I could not see.

I'm on o - ver to my house 'cause ain't no-body 'ere but me. I've been list'nin' for the last six months, and I could not see.

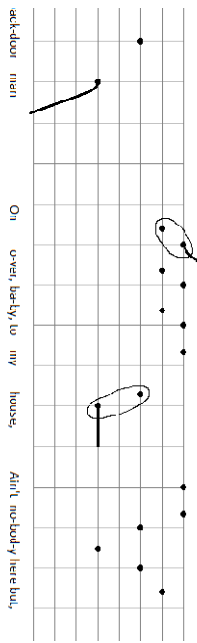
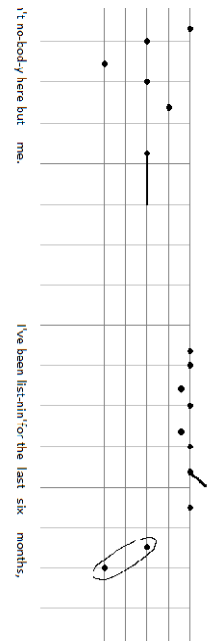
I'm on o - ver to my house 'cause ain't no-body 'ere but me. I've been list'nin' for the last six months, and I could not see.

on - ver to my house ('suse aint'no-body) here but me. I've been list'nin' for the last six months. And I could not see
 V

n/ɹ/, I was - nt too drunk to hear the back door slam. Come right on o - ver to my house. Aint' no-body here but I'm cpyin' aint' no-body ha

on - ver to my house ('suse aint'no-body) here but me. I've been list'nin' for the last six months. And I could not see.

feno, go na whip it at your hour un til you learn some sense. Come right on o - ver to my house. Aint' no bod y here but I'm cpyin' aint' no body ha



Over to My House

Elvie Thomas and Geechie Wiley

$\text{♩} = 150$

The musical score is arranged in systems of three staves each, representing two voices and a guitar. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 150. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 6, 12, 17, and 22 indicated at the start of their respective systems. The guitar part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with various chordal textures. The vocal parts are mostly rests, with lyrics appearing in the later systems. A red bracket in the guitar part at measure 12 highlights a specific melodic phrase labeled '6.1: "I'm cryin"' motive'.

6

12

17

22

6.1: "I'm cryin"' motive

Come right on o-ver to my house. Ain't no-bod - y here but me...
body-y here but ^{me}

I been listen - nin'for the last six months, and I could not see... 'Cause you can

27

Voice

shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall, throw it out the win-dow, run and catch it 'fore it falls.

Voice

throw it out the win-dow, run and catch it 'for it falls.

Gtr.

31

Voice

On ov-ver to my house, Ain't no-bod-y here but, I'm___ Ain't___ no-bod-y here but me.

Voice

here but, Ain't no-bod-y here but me.

Gtr.

36

Voice

— Come right on o-ver to my___ 'Cause ain't no-bod - y here but me___

Voice

body - y here but me

Gtr.

41

Voice

I been listen - nin' for the last six months, and I could not see___ I said you need - n't think be-cause you're

Voice

could not see

Gtr.

46

Voice

lit-tle and cute. I'm___ gon-na buy you a fox black suit. Come right on ov-ver to my house.

Voice

I'm gon' buy you a fox-black suit a fox - black suit

Gtr.

51

Voice

Ain't no-bod-y here but, I'm cryin'. Ain't no-bod-y here but me...

Voice

here but, Ain't no-bod-y here but me...

Gtr.

56

Voice

Voice

Gtr.

61

Voice

Voice

Gtr.

67

Voice

Voice

Gtr.

73

Voice

Come right on o-ver to my 'Cause ain't no-bod-y here but me... I been listen-nin' for the

Voice

Come right on o-ver to my house, ain't no-bod-y here but me...

Gtr.

78

Voice  last six months, and I could not see. When I was sit-tin' in my par-lor, just a strummin' and playin', I

Voice  I could not see.

Gtr. 

83

Voice  was-n't too drunk to hear the back door slam. Come right on ov-ver to my house. Ain't no-bod-y here but,

Voice 

Gtr. 

88

Voice  I'm cryin'. Ain't no-bod-y here but me. Come right on o-ver to my house. 'Cause

Voice  ain't no-bod-y here but me.

Gtr. 

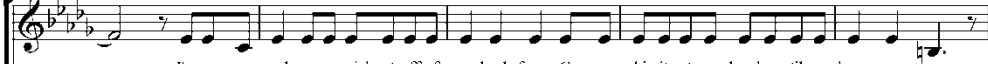
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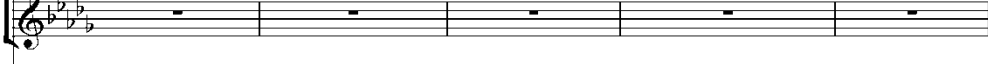
Voice  ain't no-bod-y here but me. I been listen-nin' for the last six months, and I could not see.

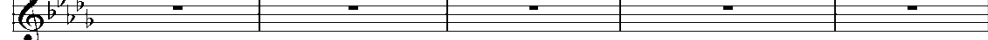
Voice  body-y here but me.

Gtr. 

98

Voice  I'm gon-na grab me a pick-et off of my back fence. Gon-na whip it at your head un-til you learn some sense.

Voice 

Gtr. 


103

Voice  Come right on ov-ver to my house. Ain't no-bod-y here but. I'm cryin'. Ain't no-bod-y here but me.

Voice 

Gtr. 

108

Voice  Come right on o-ver to my 'Cause ain't no-bod-y here but me.

Voice 

Gtr. 

113

Voice  I been listen-min' for the last six months. and I could not see. I cried ash-es to ash-es and

Voice 

Gtr. 

118

Voice  sand to sand. Ev-ery mar-ried wo-man's got a back door man. On ov-er, ba-by, to my house. Ain't

Voice 

Gtr. 

123

Voice  no-bod-y here but. I'm cryin'. Ain't no-bod-y here but me.

Voice 

Gtr. 

6

128

Voice

Voice

Gtr.

134

Voice

Voice

Gtr.

139

Voice

Voice

Gtr.

♩ = 170

Pick Poor Robin Clean

Resonant guitar introduction
3 measures

I picked poor no - bin clean, I picked poor no - bin clean, I picked his head, picked his feet I would a picked his body, but it

wasn't fit to eat, but I picked poor no - bin clean, I picked poor no - bin clean, and I'll be sat - is - fed, hay - in a fa - nt - ly

3 verses 2

Lord, did that jay - bird laugh, When I picked poor no - bin clean, poor no - bin clean, Picked poor no - bin clean

Lord, did that jay - bird laugh, When I picked poor no - bin clean, And I'll be sat - is - fed, hay - in a fa - nt - ly.

16 measure guitar bridge
verse 3

Get off my mo - ney and don't get fu - ry Cause I'm a ma - gin. Don't cut no fi - gure.

verse 4

Goin' bin' for sa - dia she is my la - dy And I'm a hust - ler' coor, That's just what I am'

You bet I picked poor ro - bin clean. I picked poor ro - bin clean. Picked his head, picked his feet I woulda picked his body, but it'

wasn't it to eat. I picked poor ro - bin clean. I picked poor ro - bin clean. And I'll be sif - is - tied hav - in' a la - ni - ly.'

Pick Poor Robin Clean

Gecchie Wiley

♩ = 100

Measures 1-6 of the piece. The first two staves (treble and alto clefs) contain whole rests. The bass staff begins with a quarter note G4, followed by a quarter rest, then eighth notes G4 and A4, and continues with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes.

Measures 7-12. Measures 7-9 have whole rests in the first two staves. The bass staff continues with eighth notes and quarter notes. Measures 10-12 have whole rests in the first two staves, and the bass staff continues with eighth notes and quarter notes.

Measures 13-18. Measures 13-15 have whole rests in the first two staves. The bass staff continues with eighth notes and quarter notes. Measures 16-18 have whole rests in the first two staves, and the bass staff continues with eighth notes and quarter notes.

Measures 19-24. All staves (treble, alto, and bass) contain whole rests for the remainder of the piece.

29

Picked poor ro-bin clean.
Lord, did that jay - bird laugh_ When I picked poor ro-bin clean.

36

Poor ro-bin clean, picked poor ro-bin clean. Lord, did that jay - bird laugh,
Poor ro-bin clean, picked poor rob-in clean. Lord, did that jay - bird laugh,

42

When I picked poor ro-bin clean And I'll be sat-is-fied hav-in' a fa-mi-ly.
When I picked poor ro-bin clean. And I'll be sat-is-fied hav-in' a fa-mi-ly.

48

54

60

Get off my mo - ney,

66

And don't get fu - ny. 'Cause I'm a ne - gra, don't cut no fig - ure.

And don't get fu - ny. 'Cause I'm a ne - gra, don't cut no fig - ure.

72

Gam-ble' for Sa - die Gam-ble' for Sa - die And I'm a hust' lin' coon,

Gam-ble' for Sa - die Gam-ble' for Sa - die And I'm a hust' - lin' coon,

78

That's just what I am. Picked poor ro-bin clean.

That's just what I am. You bet I picked poor rob-in clean. I picked poor ro-bin clean.

84

Picked his head, picked his feet. Would-a picked his bod-y but it was-n't fit to eat.

Picked his head, picked his feet. I would-a picked his bod-y but it was-n't fit to eat. I

89

picked poor ro-bin clean. I picked poor ro-bin clean. And I'll be sat-is- fied.

picked poor ro-bin clean. Picked poor ro-bin clean. And I'll be sat-is- fied.

94

hav-in' a fa-mj- ly.

hav-in' a fa-mi- ly.

100

106

112

119

126

Picked poor ro-bin clean.

133

Picked his head, picked his feet. I would-a picked his bod-y but it was-n't fit to eat. Picked poor ro-bin clean.

Picked his head, picked his feet. I would-a picked his bod-y but it was-n't fit to eat. I picked poor rob-in clean.

138

Picked poor ro-bin clean. And I'll be sat-is-fied hav-in' a fa-mi-ly.

Picked poor ro-bin clean. And I'll be sat-is-fied hav-in' a fa-mi-ly.

143

6

149

155

$\text{♩} = 225$

Last Kind Words Blues

11 measure guitar introduction
028 version 1

7.1: A (short phrase) A' (short phrase)

7.2: field holler contour

B (long phrase)

The last kind words I heard my
daddy say, Lord,
the last kind words I
heard my daddy say.

044 version 2

7.3: declarative rhythm

If I die, if I die, in the
German war, I
want you to send my no-ny, send it
to my mother in law.

101 version 3

7.4: no pitches on downbeats

I'll get killed, I'll get killed,
please don't bury my soul,
I cry, just leave me out,
let the buzzards eat me whole.

118 version 4

When you see me coming,
look across the rich man's field,
if I don't bring you flour, I'll
bring you bird seed.

135 11 measure guitar bridge
132
verse 5

I went to the de- pot. I looked up at the sun. Child, "Some rain don't come, got" be some walkin' down.

7.5: most pitches between beats

209
verse 6

My ma - - - ma told me just be - - - for the disk. "Lark, since the dawn I thought you'd be so wise."

226
verse 7

The Miss - - - sis - - - [sp - - -] - - - we, you know it's deep and wide. I can stand right here, see me baby from the other side.

242
verse 8

What you do to me, ba - by, then' gets out-a me. I B'lowe I'll see you aft' I cross the deep blue sea.

Last Kind Words Blues

Geechie Wiley

♩ = 120

8.1: half-step oscillations leading to climax

7

The last

13

kind words, I heard my da-dy say. Lord, the last kind words I

20

heard my da-dy say. If I die, if I die in the Ger-man war,

27

I want you to send my mo-ney, send it to my mo-ther in law.

34

I'll get killed, I'll get killed, please don't bury my bones. I

40

cry, just leave me out, let the ___ buz-zards eat me whole _ When you see

46

me com - in', look 'cross the ___ rich man's field if

51

I don't bring you flour, I'll ___ bring you bolt-ed meal.

58

64

I went _ to the de - pot, I looked up

70

at the sun ___ Cried, "Some train don't come, there'll be some walk-in' done.

77

My ma - ma told me just be - fore she died, ___ "Lord,

84

since the dawn, I thought you'd be so wise." The Miss - iss - sipp-i Riv

91

er, you know it's deep and wide. I can stand right here, see my ba-by from the

97

o-ther side. What you do to me, ha - by, it ne-ver gets out of me.

104

I mean I see you, af-ter I cross the deep blue sea.

♩ = 156

APPENDIX B

PARAMOUNT RECORDS ADVERTISEMENTS

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Are You Satisfied ?

The answer to the question just to the left to at least most of us would be no—yet is there any real—definite plan or effort being made to change the situation? Are we trying to sell every prospective record customer or just giving him what he asks for? Let's master our selling force until we can say that sales are satisfactory. Paramount offers the material.

- 12944—Stingaree Man Blues—Vocal
Itching Heel Chocolate Brown
- 12951—Last Kind Words Blues—Vocal
Skinney Leg Blues Geeshie Wiley
- 12952—Up On The Hill Blues—Vocal
When You Dream Of Muddy Water
Tenderfoot Edwards
- 12953—Mean Black Moan—Vocal
Heart Like Railroad Steel Charley Patton
- 12954—Insurance Man Blues—Vocal
Narrow Face Blues—Washboard Walter and His Band
- 12955—Spider In Your Dumpling—Vocal
Jumping Blues Arnold Wiley



Paramount *The Popular* Race Record

- 12948—Where Was Eve Sleeping—Vocal
I Know My Time Ain't Long Delta Big Four
- 12945—Wasn't It Sad About Lemon Walter and Byrd
Death Of Blind Lemon—Sermon... Rev. E. Dickenson
- 12946—Sootin' Me 'Bout—Vocal
Empty House Blues Blind Lemon Jefferson
- 12947—Serving Time Blues—Vocal
Loving Heart Blues Alice Moore
- 12942—Scufflin' Blues—Orchestra
It's Nobody's Business Barrel House Five
- 12943—Mean Black Cat Blues—Vocal
Magnolia Blues Charley Patton
- 12938—You Buzzard You—Vocal
Baby B. Blues Stump Johnson
- 12939—Eight Hour Woman—Vocal
That's My Man Edith North Johnson
- 12937—Jesus Is A Rock In The Weary Land—Vocal
I Stretch My Hand To Thee Biddleville Quintette
- 12933—The Chenters Spell—Vocal
Disgusted Blues Blind Lemon Jefferson
- 12930—Room Rent Blues—Vocal
45th St. Blues Charlie Spand
- 12931—Mean Black Man Blues—Vocal
Dream Daddy Blues Mary Johnson
- 12927—Nehi Blues—Vocal
Outside Woman Blues Blind Joe Reynolds
- 12924—Rattle Snake Blues—Vocal
Runnin' Wild Blues Charley Patton
- 12918—Baby Lou Blues—Vocal
Cold Love Blues Blind Blake
- 12917—Got To Have My Sweetbread—Vocal
Mississippi Blues Charlie Spand
- 12902—Leaving This Morning—Vocal
Runaway Blues Ma Rainey
- 12888—Police Dog Blues—Vocal
Diddle Wa Diddle Blind Blake

—DISTRIBUTED BY—

OPEROLLO PHONOGRAPH CO.

242 Lafayette West

Detroit, Michigan

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June 30, 1930 advertisement

6597 Sept 15/30 0300

Popular Paramount Records

Everybody Likes--

- 12982**—ST. LOUIS FIRE BLUES—Vocal—Piano Acc. Buck MacFarland
ON YOUR WAY—Vocal—Piano Acc. Buck MacFarland
- 12983**—NINETY NINE BLUES—Vocal—Guitar Acc. Blind Joe Reynolds
COLD WOMAN BLUES—Vocal—Guitar Acc. Blind Joe Reynolds
- 12984**—BLUB BLUB BLUES—Vocal—Guitar Acc. Smokey Harrison
MAIL COACH BLUES—Vocal—Guitar Acc. Smokey Harrison
- 12979**—TRUST IN GOD AND DO THE RIGHT—Vocal—Guitar Acc.
I BELIEVE I'LL GO BACK HOME—Vocal—Guitar Acc. Blind Willie Davis
- 12980**—MOBILE STOMP—Instrumental New Orleans Nehi Boys
FARISH ST. RAG—Instrumental New Orleans Nehi Boys

Race Records

- 12981—Black Gal Makes It Thunder—Vocal—Piano Acc.
Corn Trimmer Blues—Vocal—Piano Acc. Rudy Foster
- 12977—Motherless Child Blues—Vocal—Guitar Acc.
Over To My House—Vocal Duet Elvie Thomas
- 12971—Sin Is A Mess—Sermon Rev. Emmet Dickenson
Watch—Sermon Rev. Emmet Dickenson
- 12972—Green River Blues—Voc.—Guitar Acc. Charley Patton
Elder Greene Blues—Vocal—Guitar—Violin Acc.
Charley Patton
- 12973—Have Mercy Blues—Vocal—Piano—Trombone Acc.
Cold Iron Walls—Vocal—Piano—Trombone Acc. Alice Moore
- 12965—I'm So Glad—Vocal—Inst. Acc. Ida Cox
Jailhouse Blues—Vocal—Inst. Acc. Ida Cox
- 12964—Keep It Home—Vocal—Guitar Acc. Blind Blake
Sweet Jivin' Mama—Vocal—Guitar Acc. Blind Blake
- 12959—Sermon For Men Only—Sermon
Rev. Emmet Dickenson
- What The Men Wanted The Woman Was Settin' On
Sermon Rev. Emmet Dickenson
- 12957—There Will Be Glory Norfolk Jubilee Quartette
I'm Gonna Open My Mouth Norfolk Jubilee Quartette
- 12956—You Got That Wrong—Vocal—Guitar Acc.
Self Experience Blues—Vocal—Guitar Acc. Papa Charlie Jackson
- 12946—Bootin' Me 'Bout—Vocal—Guitar Acc.
Empty House Blues Blind Lemon Jefferson
- 12943—Mean Black Cat Blues—Vocal—Guitar Acc.
Magnolia Blues Charley Patton
- 12948—Where Was Eve Sleeping—Delta Sacred Singing
I Know My Time Ain't Long Delta Big Four

Old Time Tunes

- 3250—The New Sensation—Vocal—Piano Acc.
Swing Out On The Premises Bartlett's Gospel Four
- 3249—Jennie My Own True Love—Vocal Duet
A Railroad Lover For Me Emry Arthur-Della Hatfield
- 3248—Don't Marry A Man If He Drinks—Vocal—Inst. Acc.
Will They Deny Me When They're Men Martin Brothers
- 3247—She's A Hard Boiled Rose—Vocal
The Fate Of Rhoda Sweetin Charles Freshour and the Lonely Eagles
- 3246—The Girl That Wore A Waterfall—Comic
Aunt Betsy's Choice—Inst. Stevens-Donlay
- 3245—The Bumble Bee—Comic Bartlett's Boosters
My Nose—Comic Bartlett's Boosters
- 3244—Work In The Harvest Field—Vocal—Piano Acc.
He Is King Bartlett's Gospel Four
- 3237—Reuben Oh Reuben—Vocal—Guitar Acc.
She Lied To Me Emry Arthur
- 3229—Chinese Breakdown—Instrumental
Macon, Ga. Breakdown Hoke Rice and His Southern String Band
- 3228—Shall It Be You—Sacred Vocal
Don't You Want To Go Dixie Sacred Trio
- 3223—Back To The Harbor Of Home Sweet Home—Vocal
Don't Sing Aloha When I Go Welling-McGhee-Teter
- 3210—Knocking Down Casey Jones—Vocal—Guit.-Banjo Acc.
Been On The Job Too Long Wilmer Watts and The Lonely Eagles
- 3182—I've Anchored In Love Divine—Vocal—Inst. Acc.
No One To Welcome Me Home Carver Boys

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September 15, 1930 advertisement

